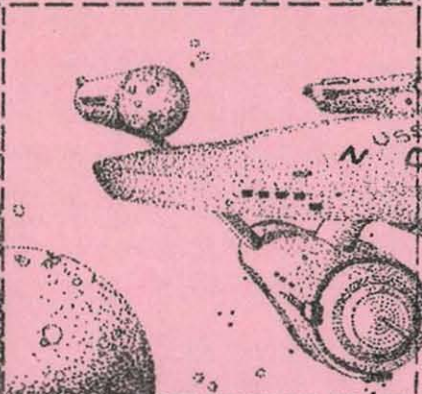
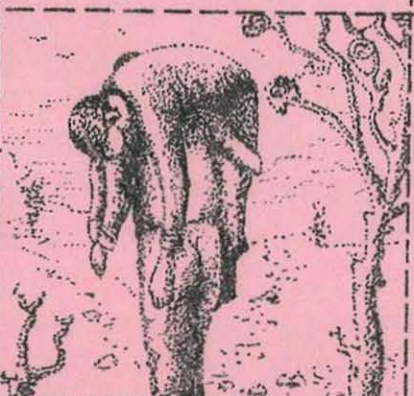
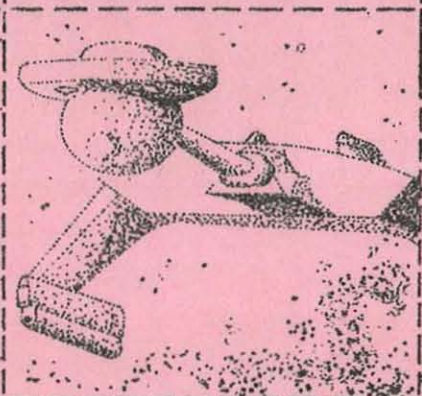
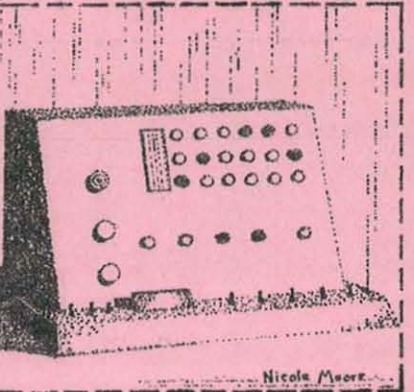
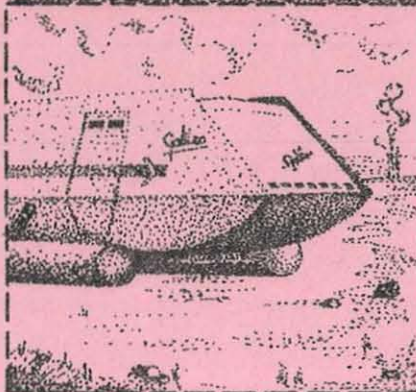


REPEAT MISSIONS

4



a **STAR TREK**
fanzine



Nicola Moore

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Last Troubadour and The Whisky Chorus have also been reprinted in R & R

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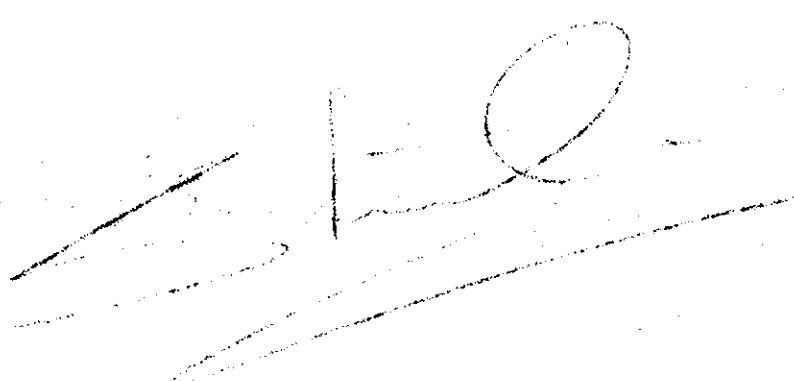
Hello everyone, and welcome to the fourth issue of Repeat Missions.

As most of you probably know, we started Repeat Missions to keep in print some of the more popular stories from our other anthologies of general ST fiction, mainly Log Entries. We would have liked to keep Log Entries in print (indeed, we would like to keep all the zines we've put out in print) but this is impossible; storage space isn't completely elastic, and so we have to let zines go OP, although we will keep Repeat Missions in print as long as is feasible.

If you've borrowed OP Log Entries from friends and have a favourite story that you'd like to see reprinted, why not write and let me know? We can only guess from general LoCs that we've received over the years which stories are the most popular; we're putting in the ones that have received most general comment. But that doesn't mean that some of the others aren't worthy of being reprinted too; just that nobody who has liked them has written to tell us so. British readers are particularly slow at writing to zineds with comment/criticism, and without reader feedback, an editor can't know what has been most enjoyed. All right, I've said it before (and I suppose most of you have come across the situation too with regard to episodes), one person's favourite story/episode is the one someone else likes least, but it is possible to find averages. But we can't do it without feedback!

All Log Entries up to and including LE 25 are now out of print. We increased the run after LE 25, so the most recent issues should remain available for a while, but we'll be considering all stories up to those in 25 for reprinting in Repeat Missions. If there's one you think should be included, please, let me know!

January 1980



HOME IS THE HUNTED by Veronica Wallace

"Come, Kirk-ala!" Tiraytha crooned, long spiked lashes fluttering over liquid amber eyes. Surely she was the sweetest, most beautiful woman on Kapan!

"Forget the strange one," she murmured. "Patoorit guests him. They see the wild land. He learns what he wishes. Come, Kirk-ala, drink. Eat of the fruit of Kapan. Then we dance for you. Tiraytha, she dance well." She raised the wine decanter gracefully.

"No. No more, Tiraytha! It must be nearly dark." Kirk struggled out of the depths of the Kapan guest chair. "We have to get back to the Enterprise. Scotty... Bones... It's time we left. You've entertained us well, Tiraytha, you and your friends... How much longer will your brother be? He said the visit would be brief, an hour or so in the flier, out to the wild lands. Spock should be back by now. What's keeping them, Tiraytha?"

"Always the strange one!" Tiraytha pouted. "Are we not beautiful? Does the guesting displease? Speak, Kirk-ala, we will remedy. Kapan is guest-world. Let us guest you."

She wound slender brown arms around his neck and smiled up into his face. McCoy was having similar trouble - Sireeth would not let him leave his comfortable chair! Scotty, on a guest-ease talking to three of the Kapan maidens, showed no sign of stirring. Jim Kirk frowned. The party could go on... and on... and on... There was no need to leave. The Enterprise hung in orbit with a skeleton crew on duty, while the rest took very welcome shore leave on Kapan. A guest-planet, beautiful, welcoming, paradise indeed after the dull routine of the last months. And yet... this vague uneasiness... Spock had been gone so long... with the Kapan men-folk... he had not called in. But then again, why should he? If the wild lands held him interest... even although it got dark...

"Tiraytha, no. The party's over." He pushed her firmly from him, shook her very lightly. "Spock, Tiraytha, my First Officer. When do I get him back?"

She jerked away angrily, the translucent scarlet shimmer-gown fluttering around her sinuous body.

"Unkind, Kirk-ala! Ungracious! You spoil the guesting... all for that, the strange one... We go. Sireeth, an end. Come, leave them!"

Bright glittering fabrics swirled around the room, the multi-toned bell-beads of the door curtain chimed a frenzied harmony and the girls were gone. Scotty sighed and drained his jewelled cup. McCoy rose and crossed the flower-strewn mosaic floor to where the Captain stood, trying again and again to contact Spock on the communicator. To no purpose. The Enterprise reported a similar loss of contact.

"It's a guest-planet, Jim. What harm can come to him?" McCoy's reassurance was hesitant, revealing his own doubts. "He preferred to tour the planet with the men. He's having a ball somewhere, studying the mating habits of the sludge-beetle, or something. Patoorit will take care of him. Why worry?"

"His communicator could be damaged," Scotty suggested.

"In which case, he'd return." It was certain now, something must have happened. "We beam up. With the ship's sensors at our disposal we can scan the whole planet if we have to!"

"Spock!" Patoorit chuckled, long-lidded eyes glittering. "Another strange one! Look at the ears, my brothers, and the skin! Ah, we have bruised it... just a little! Shall we see it bleed?"

His hunting spear flashed in the dying sunlight. A long line appeared across Spock's naked body. Blood began to trickle.

"Green..." hissed his tormentors. "It has green blood, yet calls itself a man!"

"Vulcan blood." Spock was calm, almost relaxed in the fierce grip of his captors. Ringed with ready spears in the hands of Kapan under blood-lust, resistance was impossible. Watch, listen, learn...

"I am half Vulcan; you know that, Patoorit..."

A savage blow to the mouth jolted back his head.

"'Lord', creature, call me 'Lord'!" Patoorit snarled. "Are we your equals, animal? You dare to wear man-shape, to speak man-tongue! Kapan shall be cleansed of such!"

"I had gathered your antagonism is racially based," Spock said through swelling lips. "Perhaps there are also religious reasons? I know so little of..."

Another blow stunned him into silence.

"Religious reasons?" Patoorit panted. "You think us mumbling idiots? We are men of Kapan, creature - hunters, always hunters! But our fathers left us little game to hunt; only the crawling things our brats can kill bare-handed. So now we stock our hunting lands with such as you; you will make good sport, animal. But first you roam the lands awhile. Seek out the others... breed... My sons shall hunt for yours... Bell him, Catingis!"

Rough hands jerked back his head, thrust round his neck a noose of unbreakable hold-string. Bell beads chimed on it, each brilliant colour marking a different tone. He felt the coil tighten, a flash of pain as the heat-lock fused the ends together.

"We shall hear you, creature, when we hunt. The bells, their tones are noted. We tell our quarry by the tune it plays." He laughed. "Throw it down, friends. Let it run free, for now..."

Spock was dragged to the cliff edge - a steep slope of blue chalk. Spears pricked his back. He fell, and the bell-beads jingled as he rolled and tumbled down into the shadowed undergrowth below. Half stunned, he lay still, listening...

"We guard the borders, creature. Join your kind. One day, we hunt..."

A short while later the fliers soared into the evening sky and swooped away across the empty lands.

"People, in the wild lands?" Kirk was incredulous. "One group, you mean? Spock, Patoorit's party?"

"No, sir." Ensign Chekov was quite definite. "The sensors show many small groups scattered over the entire area. Human, probably very primitive. No machinery, nor power of any kind. Unless Kapan has religious groups who choose to live in monastic seclusion, as nomads... But there is no mention of that in the library computer. Or of these people."

"And Spock could be any one of them? The sensors cannot pick him out?"

"At this range, sir? If he were wholly Vulcan..."

"Captain!" Uhura's voice was urgent. "The Chieftan of Kapan! He wishes to beam up. He brings you news of Mr. Spock."

Spock loped tirelessly along the narrow track in the dense tangle of undergrowth. The sunrise scarcely warmed him, but by its light he saw the tracks of men among the twigs and fallen leaves. Not recent tracks... but he would find them, the hunted of Kapan... Who were they, natives of this planet, or 'guests' as he had been? Men, women, children, condemned to live and die as animals, prey to Patoorit and his kind?

The bell-beads round his neck sang at every step, their piercing notes dulling his hearing, vibrating through his mind. He made a conscious effort to cancel out the auditory receptors most affected, leaving his hearing part impaired, but capable of registering sounds on other levels. Running naked, bare-foot, a long forgotten sensation from his childhood; but with unknown perils, here. The wild lands of Kapan were so little documented. But the others, they survived... how? As savages? Did fear and degradation keep them as ferocious as the hunters?

Spock had every intention of finding out. Then he could turn his thoughts to the problem of contacting the Enterprise.

They waited in the transporter room as three figures shimmered into being; Tiraytha, Patoorit, and their father Thath, Chieftan of Kapan. Tiraytha ran wailing to crouch at Kirk's feet, Patoorit flung himself face down before them, arms extended, hands empty, open, palms up.. Thath, a burden in his hands covered in a heavy grey cloth, stood tall and dignified, his eyes downcast.

"Thath - you are welcome to my ship." Kirk gave formal greeting hurriedly, trying to ignore the chill foreboding that he felt. "News... You bring me news of Spock?"

"The missing one is dead." Thath's voice was calm, impersonal. He raised sharp, watchful eyes to study them. "My son returns alive to tell his death. That is his shame. We bring you these - belongings of the dead one. They have been cleansed. I regret that sorrow touches you, here on Kapan. Patoorit, speak."

Kirk took the bundle from the old man's hands, uncovering Spock's equipment, tricorder, communicator, belt - everything but clothing. Thath watched wordlessly, his face a wrinkled sallow mask. Patoorit was speaking, a low, inaudible mutter.

"Stand up, Patoorit... and Tiraytha. How did he die?" Kirk's voice was harsh. McCoy's hand closed on his shoulder.

"The worms..." Patoorit spoke jerkily, standing stiff before them, his gaze reaching woodenly beyond them. "...He crossed a glade and fell into their nest. He died. There was no way to aid, or save. The wolf-worms took him."

"Where is his body, Patoorit? If Spock is dead, we give his body honour. Why did you leave it?" Angry disbelief was raging in Kirk's mind. Spock could not be dead...

"The dead one leaves no body." Patoorit's eyes shifted a little. "Wolf-worms are all-devouring. We used our spears to reach his tools, metal they cannot harm."

"And I was harsh to you," Tiraytha wept. "Forgive, Kirk-ala! It was the strange one spoiled our guesting... I weep. Forgive...!"

"Spoiled the guesting?" McCoy was incredulous.

"Spock, Tiraytha," Kirk muttered. "His name was Spock." Strange that they never named him - was there some reason? "Patoorit, take us there." Resolve stirred him to action. He had to know the truth. "Can you pin point the spot? So we can beam directly there?"

"Not I!" Tiraytha's trembling cry was piteous. "I fear the worms."

Patoorit glanced at her indifferently, shrugged, and looked at Kirk. "I can do it. Come, we see the worms. But not the lost one. There is nothing left to see."

McCoy and Kirk watched him turn away with Scotty, and looked at one another questioningly. A certain smugness in his voice, a hint of triumph, even...?

He was tiring, but the track was broader. Spock had covered many miles, seen the wavering paths branch and cross. Always he had chosen the wider trail, or that most recently used. Now he had crossed the hills, and the path wound down towards

a river valley. Wound tortuously... a direct line across the turf, under the feather-fronded trees, would save him time and effort. He left the path, loped on downhill, into a heady scent, while a corner of his brain pondered on the oddity of that unnecessary... detour in the path? To avoid what...? His feet thudded on the turf, the slender trees vibrated... A sudden hail around him, a shower of red... petals? Seeds? They pattered against his bare flesh, clung there, swelling.

Spock raced out into the open, beating at the things, uselessly. He recognised the panic that had gripped him, quelled it, investigating as calmly as he could this new phenomenon. He had, after all, set out to study Kapan's ecology...

Flowers, small red flowers, already fertilised... There were tendrils amongst the petals, anchoring them to his skin... No, rooting them... The tendrils had pierced the skin, were probing him... Pain was spreading like a slow fire. Difficult to quell entirely... The blooms were rubbery, he could not crush them, or detach them... The swelling, the seed pods were developing, fed on his blood, his tissue. An unknown species of carnivorous plant... and likely to remain so... Blackness was rising, engulfing him... He heard bells chiming as he fell...

"Hold still, fool. There are so many, they will kill you." The voice was young, a girl's. He lay gasping on his face while firm hands held him down.

"I have an antidote... a flower extract... but maybe not enough. Be still, I dare not waste it."

She worked in silence on his back and shoulders. A lancing spear-point of agony at every touch, that eased as suddenly, taking the fiery pain with it. She rolled him over, working quickly and carefully. Her head was a dark patch against the sun, which made her hair a halo.

"I have so little left... This last, here in your hair... I cannot, it is finished." She leaned closer, studying the bloom. She wore a tunic of woven silvery leaves, a cape of grasses. "It does you little hurt. Your hair is thick. The flower clings to that, it does not touch the skin. You are made safe."

She sat back on her heels and smiled at him. Her skin was honey gold, her eyes grey and humorous. Spock sat up.

"I should have known. Paths do not detour round safe places. Thank you. It seems unnecessary to add that I'm a stranger here."

"As are we all." Her face was sombre suddenly. She held up her hands, small, slender, graceful hands... six-fingered. "We differ, each of us. But we are not animal...and we do not go naked. Here, take this for now."

She gave him her cape and waited while he wound and tied it round his waist.

"I am Ardan. I take you to the Keep. Come, it isn't far."

"Here," said Patoorit, pointing to the churned black earth. "The pit. They dig beneath the ground. The strange one's weight broke through."

There were scraps of cloth in the soil... Spock's clothing, shredded... boots half-buried. Kirk moved closed, searching.

"Too close!" Patoorit stopped him and McCoy drew him back a pace.

"Watch!" Patoorit opened the skin bag at his hip and pulled out a chunk of rotting meat. He thrust it on the point of his spear, reached out and plunged it in the ground. When he lifted it out, it was alive, white with crawling, heaving inch-long worms. The disturbed soil was boiling with them... the grasses near their feet... Patoorit tossed the stinking mass away, and the worms veered back, towards it.

"The strange one died. They killed. You wish to stay?" Patoorit was brusque, almost insolent. Kirk shook his head and turned away. It was the

Doctor who called the Enterprise requesting a beam up.

The Keep was a cavern in the hillside. A spur of rock jutted high into the sky above it, towering over the gently swelling hills. The entrance was a cleft in the rock, screened by thorn bushes. There was no guard. Spock lifted an eyebrow and Ardan smiled.

"Why should we guard the Keep? It is the place for children, for the old and sick. The hunters scorn to touch it."

"Where are the others, then? The men and women?" They were walking now down a widening tunnel lit by smoking torches.

"We roam the wild lands, alone or in small groups. The fliers watch us always. It is forbidden to gather in large numbers. They punish us with fire."

"I saw only spears. They have other weapons, then?"

"Only on the fliers, to herd and threaten with. They take a pride in hunting with spears alone. And we have only wood and stone to fashion our defense." Ardan's voice was bleak and bitter, her face unreadable in the flickering shadows. She led him out into a chamber where children sat in groups around elderly men and women. "We teach the children all we can. Knowledge is strength. Come, all strangers must be brought to the information room. It is beyond."

"You teach strangers how to survive the hunt?" Spock questioned.

Ardan laughed. "Survive? We teach all that we can. But it is our custom to learn from strangers all that they can teach. Our elders write it down, our young ones learn from it. One day, perhaps, we shall have knowledge enough to achieve the home-going."

They were entering a smaller cavern now, where grey-haired people sat at rough hewn tables strewn with tablets of indented clay. Some studied, others wrote with pointed sticks. A tall, white-haired man rose to greet them.

"Ardan, you bring a new-comer! Welcome, both." He took their hands in his. "You are tired? Hungry? Come and sit awhile. Selta, bring food and drink - and healing salve. You have the marks of blood-blooms on your skin, my friend. Ardan released you?"

"Of all but one, Tarindi." Ardan smiled. "That one in his hair will die by morning. It does not touch the skin. I have no essence left. Can your healers give me more?"

"Gladly, child. But first you rest and eat."

He led them to a couch of dried sweet-smelling leaves. A woman with a humped back came with water and fresh bread on a wooden dish, and a clay pot full of ointment. Tarindi took it, began to tend the green-black marks that covered Spock.

"I don't believe it, Jim." McCoy slammed a balled fist into his palm, pacing fretfully to and fro. "That meat stank. I know of no creature that kills for food which would respond to meat that rotten. Except when starving, which, according to Patoorit, those worms weren't. I don't trust him either. Scotty, Jim, do you?"

They shook their heads, frowning.

"So," Scotty mused, "we assume that they are liars, and Spock, alive or dead, is somewhere else."

"Alive." Kirk was thinking clearly now. The shock and horror that had stricken him were lifting. "If he were really dead, they'd have shown us his body, in that hole. Being eaten, but still recognisable. Green blood would prove his identity. So, he lives. A captive? Or escaped?"

"Why would they keep him captive? What use could he be?" McCoy faced them. "Those Kapan buildings - they're simple structures. It's a guest world, and we have right of entry anywhere."

"A search? It's possible. Crewmen, in groups of two or three. But only as guests, exploring, visiting... Meanwhile, I think the wild lands deserve closer study. The shuttlecraft, Bones. We'll tour the place until he's found."

"But first, we get some rest." McCoy was adamant. "We can leave in time to catch the next sunrise over that area. But we have to be fit if we're to help Spock any."

"Agreed. Meanwhile we'll keep the area monitored. It may give us a lead."

"Ardan spoke of home-going." It was night, but underground it made little difference. "Tarindi, are you natives of this world, or visitors, as I am?"

"Both, and many born of us here in the wilds. We do not make distinctions between peoples. We are all hunted, far from home. There is a faith that one day we will return. We keep the call-horns for that time. Here, in the Keep, the Great One. Others at watch-places in the lands. It is foretold that help will come suddenly. Our people must speed home, and the Keep here is the gateway."

"You can call them in? All of them?" Spock was eager - there was a chance, for all of them. "The Enterprise is somewhere overhead. It will be searching. They are not easily deceived. If we can make some sign, to let my people know... and call yours in, before the hunters strike..."

"Fire for signalling by night, and smoke by day." Ardan had caught his enthusiasm. "The hunters will come for sure, but our people travel quickly, even by night."

"It is not time." Tarindi was sombre, unimpressed. "The Call-horns may not sound before the day of Home-going. It is the Law. We may not break it, however strong your faith in those you leave."

The old man rose and turned away. Spock made to follow him, but Ardan caught his hand.

"He will not be persuaded. The old need much convincing. They wait for certainty, or miracles. Tell me your plan. The Call-horn is unguarded..."

It was dawn. Spock caught the first rays of the rising sun as he stared down from the summit of the great rock spur. Mists filled the river valley, but on the hillside - that was smoke, from carefully tended fires. He raised the Call-horn to his lips again. So small, it seemed, and yet the ancient, fine-honed wood and red-fibred mouthpiece sang loud enough to deafen him. Other horns answered his, from all around... nearer, much nearer than before...

"The groups are moving, Captain. Gathering in towards the South." Chekov was jubilant. "If Mr. Spock is one of them... I can give you the co-ordinates for the gathering point. Will you still need the shuttlecraft? We could beam down..."

"I'll scout it first. Any sign of the Kapan fliers? Do they patrol at night?"

"Seemingly not, sir. But we have detected some entering the area."

"Keep me informed. Bones, Scotty, we're leaving now."

The fires were burning well. Now, in the light, Ardan and her friends were working against time. The hillside grass and shrubs made too much smoke. If fliers came too soon... Already the fires on the lower slopes had done their

work. The outline of the Starfleet insignia was nearing completion. If the hunters reached it first, they would have to fire the whole hillside to burn away the mark. Even then, the Enterprise would notice it, ask questions. They had a chance...

The fliers came, swooping low over the further hills. Spock, from his vantage point, saw them first. He blew the horn again, short, strident notes - the alarm he had pre-arranged with Ardan. People ran for cover as the hunt ships flamed across the hillside, soared, turned and came again. The grass was burning in wide arcs already, Spock's signal scored across, almost unrecognisable... But there, to the East, the Galileo... They had come.

Kirk was dogging the fliers, trying to study the ground through the drifts of smoke. Scotty, his accent sharpened with excitement, was in contact with the Enterprise. McCoy strained to see...

"Jim, a man on the cliff-edge. They're shooting at him..."

Scotty shrieked co-ordinates to the Enterprise as the figure slipped, hung for a moment, then began a slow, dream-like fall down the sheer rock wall. If the transporter could not catch him...

Uhura's voice, almost delirious with relief:

"We have Mr. Spock, sir. Report from the transporter room coming in... he's unharmed, but... he's wearing a grass skirt, beads, and there's a flower in his hair. He also has a trumpet, made of wood... What kind of party was that, anyhow?"

"Welcome him home, Uhura. We're setting down. I want to meet his friends. Send word to Thath... I think Starfleet will want an explanation from him. Kirk out." He was grinning now.

McCoy whooped with laughter. "Spock in fancy dress... I hope someone up there had the sense to get a picture of him..."

ELAAN by Ann Flegg

Savage child of Elaas
Untamed by any man
Proud and haughty were you,
Looking down on everyone.
But now you rage and weep
Against this duty put on you.
You think of life now to be yours,
A cage you cannot escape.

Savage child,
When will you learn
The freedom you thought you had
Was an illusion.
You are already caged
By the position you hold,
Subject to the Council
To decide your life
And the way it will go.

+++++

ORDEAL by Valerie Piacentini

Beyond any doubt, Kirk thought, this room had been expressly designed to remove any lingering feelings of hope. The walls had been painted a drab unrelieved green, the monotonous surfaces broken only by a narrow window which looked out onto the blank wall of the building opposite, and by two heavy doors. Through one of these he had entered - how long ago was it? - with his two friends; through the other he would soon pass - alone. It seemed that the fear and hopelessness of the uncounted numbers who had preceded him through that door lingered heavily in the air, mingling with a distinct, indefinable aroma that was almost, but not quite, familiar.

Across the room, McCoy leaned against the window, gazing out at the grey leaden sky; he turned now, feeling Kirk's gaze on him, his blue eyes filled with pain and regret. Somehow Kirk found the courage to smile, to silently tell his friend that of course he understood; in the medical kit were drugs that would relax him, place a barrier between his conscious mind and the Ordeal that was to come, but even on this primitive world the presiding Technician might detect their presence, and all would be lost. The Enterprise would not return for another forty eight hours, and despite all his efforts, the Ordeal could be postponed no longer.

The doctor's face grew hazy as the pain mounted higher; he felt sick, dizzy - he fought for control, knowing that he must not fail now. One final effort, one last test of endurance - if only he could hold on!

A strong, gentle hand caught his, slim fingers touched his face lightly, and the pain receded a little; he looked up into dark, anxious eyes that studied him concernedly. Kirk sighed with relief and relaxed for a moment against the strong shoulder, enjoying the temporary respite, but all too soon he pulled away. This mission had been hard on all of them - his own mysterious fever, McCoy's broken wrist - even Spock had not adapted too well to this world. If only the Enterprise had not had to leave them! Still, too late for regrets now, it was almost over. The illness of the other two had been a great strain on the Vulcan, and for this reason Kirk had forbidden Spock to link with him, but as usual he had set his concern for his Captain above his own welfare, giving his last reserves of strength to help Kirk endure what was to come. The selflessness of that giving increased Kirk's determination - he would survive this Ordeal, for if he broke, if he betrayed himself, both these valued friends would suffer, Spock most of all.

The sinister door opened at last with a suddenness that took them all by surprise; a white-robed Technician stood there, silently motioning Kirk to follow. He rose obediently, hesitated, glanced at McCoy; the blue eyes tried to smile encouragement, but were dimmed by an apprehension he could not conceal. Kirk found that his hands were shaking, and he clasped them together, trying to conceal the evidence of his fear; a warm, strong hand closed over his fingers for an instant, stilling the trembling, and with one last look into the compassionate eyes Kirk turned and followed the Technician. As he crossed the threshold he glanced back in time to see Spock rise to greet McCoy, who had crossed to him, instinctively seeking to share his support at this moment. He need not fear for them, he thought, for they would comfort each other as they waited; only he must somehow find the courage to go on alone, to pass through the Ordeal without betraying himself.

* * *

A short stretch of corridor - too short, he could have wished it longer - then the white-robed figure beckoning him through yet another door, thick, heavy, close-fitting; he shuddered, knowing the reason for its weight - screams would be muffled by the heavy wood, not reaching the room where the others waited. But unhearing, they would still know, would live every second of torment, each stab of pain with him.

The chair waited; unresisting, he allowed himself to be guided into its metal and leather embrace. There was no point in fighting now, and delay would only prolong the agony. Out of the corner of his eye he glimpsed the flash of metal, and resolved not to look. Useless; despite himself his head turned and he surveyed with dreadful anticipation the shining instruments laid out in readiness; needles, wickedly pointed; razor-sharp blades; probes to seek relentlessly for jagged nerves. Shuddering, he looked away, only to see the final, barbaric refinement of cruelty - over the chair a mirror had been hung, reflecting now his own apprehensive eyes; all too soon it would show him in graphic detail exactly what was being done to him. In this place of shining metal and glass and leather, Human flesh and blood seemed suddenly very fragile. A hand touched his shoulder, pushing him back so that he lay half-reclining; a head moved into sight, mercifully blocking his view of the mirror; cold gray eyes looked impersonally into his.

"Now," said the Technician, calmly, "it begins."

* * *

The needles first, sinking deep into cringing flesh, not in themselves intolerable, but holding the promise of pain and terror to come; then other, nameless instruments, probing, twisting, tearing until only the most supreme effort of will hold him still and silent. Beneath his hands the leather of the chair was worn smooth and shining by the convulsive grip of previous victims; others had survived this, so could he - but nothing had prepared him for the indignity, the humiliation of the pain those skilful hands inflicted.

He thought that his suffering only confirmed the conclusion that the survey team had reached - this planet was ripe for first contact. Advanced though its people were in many ways, this hideous survival from a more primitive age argued forcefully that the teaching of the Federation was needed to banish the Ordeal from the lives of its citizens.

There was a moment's respite as the Technician paused to confer with the Attendant who assisted him; all too soon the brief consultation was over, and his tormentor resumed the merciless probing, shredding nerves already strained almost beyond endurance; with humiliation he felt tears sting his eyes, tasted blood in his mouth, and dug his nails savagely into the palms of his hands - anything to keep himself from breaking down, from betraying himself and his friends.

His friends! Think of them, he told himself firmly; think of Bones and Spock, waiting there in an agony of apprehension. They depend on you, they trust you - you can't let them down now! They understood and shared his dread, and their own suffering would be no less than his as their imaginations lived every second of exquisite torment with him. How much longer would this Ordeal last? Surely it must be almost over?

The Technician leaned closer; in his hands... something... reflected the bright glare of the overhead lights; the waves of sick pain crashed to an intolerable level, tearing him apart... it was no use, he could hold on no longer... "I'm... sorry..." he managed to whisper; then consciousness finally, mercifully, fled.

* * *

In the drab, green room McCoy paced restlessly, fighting the urge to barge through that ominous door, to find Jim, to... to what? Snatch him away, somehow end the pain? He could try that, and in the attempt betray their identities and their mission. The Technician had him now, and he must wait; even if he got Jim away, his broken wrist would render him powerless to help his friend; and if the Technician got one look at his drugs and instruments, he would surely become suspicious, might even recognise them for what they

were, aliens in this place. But to let Jim suffer God alone knew what barbaric indignities... The quiet voice broke in on his thoughts.

"Doctor, this restlessness serves no useful purpose. You would do better to remain calm - Jim will need you when... when this is over. Try to be patient."

"Patient! Like you, I suppose!" McCoy snorted. "Don't you understand... don't you know what they're doing to Jim in there?" He broke off abruptly as a dreadful suspicion occurred to him; Spock's voice had held a familiar note.

"You're linked!" he said accusingly.

"Yes, Doctor." Spock's voice was the merest thread of sound.

"But Jim expressly forbade..."

"I had to disobey; I could no longer bear... his suffering. He does not know - he will believe he fainted - but I felt... his pain, his fear. He will survive this without speaking - that is all that matters; do not... shame him... by telling him of the link; he was... so tired, so ill..."

"So are you, Spock." McCoy touched the Vulcan's shoulder; the velvet-dark eyes reflected all too clearly the pain of the Ordeal, and he could feel the very slight trembling in Spock's body that betrayed the strain he was feeling.

"I did not believe," the deep voice went on, "that such... barbaric practices still existed."

"We can't blame these people, Spock," McCoy commented sadly. "It's their way, they don't know any better... perhaps one day..." He straightened, resumed his aimless pacing. "Oh God, how much longer!" he burst out.

Silence. He looked across at Spock, saw the Vulcan suddenly slump in his chair, his hands covering his face.

"Spock!" McCoy bent over the motionless figure. "What's wrong?"

Slowly the tense hands dropped; the dark eyes gazed into his, alight with unconcealed relief.

"It... is over," Spock said simply.

* * *

The opening door brought both men to their feet, tense, expectant. The Technician entered first, followed by an Attendant bearing Kirk's unconscious body in his arms. As they started forward the Technician said,

"Your friend is in shock; he will recover shortly."

He motioned to the Attendant, who laid Kirk on a couch; a moment later the three men were alone.

* * *

Kirk awoke slowly; his first thought was instant recognition of the strong arms that held him comfortingly, his second, that the searing agony had subsided to a dull ache that was fading even now. He opened heavy eyes to see the two dear, familiar faces gazing down anxiously.

"Spock! Bones! What happened?" he asked weakly.

"You fainted, Jim," McCoy's voice answered. "Don't worry, it's over." He shot the contents of a hypo into Kirk's arm. "Just something to help you get on your feet again - we've got to get back to the pick-up point, and we have some rough going ahead. Jim, I'm sorry I couldn't give you anything to help you through this, but you know the risk; if you'd relaxed under the drug you might have let something slip..."

"It's all right, Bones - I understand." Kirk grinned with affection - McCoy had been so worried. And Spock? Kirk knew him well enough to sense his concern. He met the dark eyes reassuringly.

"I feel fine now," he said. "But Spock - I didn't betray us, did I?" He could not conceal the anxiety in his voice, the fear that he might have said something while unconscious that would have revealed who and what they were.

"No, Jim, you did not; the Technician suspects nothing - as far as he knows, you were just another victim of his instruments of torture."

Thankfully Kirk relaxed, resting his head against Spock's shoulder, allowing himself the luxury of this comfort while McCoy's drug took effect. At last he raised his head.

"Come on, let's get out of here," he said, looking back with a shudder at the firmly-closed door. "Let's go home."

* * *

As they retraced their steps McCoy stopped abruptly, pulling Kirk round to face him.

"Before we leave, I've got just one thing to say to you, Captain James T. Kirk," he growled.

"What's that, Bones?"

"Next time you decide to go tearing off on this sort of mission, for Pete's sake make sure your medical checks have been completed first - an abscessed tooth's no joke on a planet where the practice of dentistry is still in its infancy!"

TRIBBLE by Elvis Klingon

If you're looking for tribbles
You came to the right place.
If you're looking for tribbles
Just look right in my place.
They are born in a trice
And enjoy a good snack.
Won't you ask Cyrano Jones if he'll please take them back.

They're not evil,
Their middle name is harmony.
They're not evil,
But won't you please get them off me.

I ain't never looked for tribbles
I just ain't no fan.
I don't want no presents
From that Cy Jones man.
They're only made out
Of flesh, fur and bone,
But every time I see one it really makes me moun.

They're not evil,
Their middle name is harmony.
They're not evil,
But to a Klingon they're misery.

Translated by Anne Snell.

OPEN TO SUGGESTIONS by Janet HallPART 1

"Captain's Log, Stardate 4759.4. The shuttlecraft containing the eminent Tellarite physician Hod, his medical team and his patient is due to rendezvous with the Enterprise in six minutes. Dr McCoy has readied his sickbay for Dr. Hod's use, and the entire Enterprise medical staff is standing by in case needed. I shall welcome Dr. Hod aboard and conduct him to sickbay personally."

Captain Kirk switched off the recorder. "Report, Mr. Sulu?"

"Shuttlecraft set to dock in 5.78 minutes, Captain."

"Thank you, Mr. Sulu." Kirk stood up. "Mr. Spock, I'll be in the shuttlecraft bay."

"Very good, Captain."

The doors of the shuttlecraft bay swept open to reveal the mysterious and awe-inspiring sight of deep space. The Enterprise was close to no major suns or planetary bodies, so no bright light stole away the splendour of the blackness of the galactic backdrop, dotted with the myriad pinpricks of multicoloured light that were suns. They seemed so slight, so trivial in comparison to the bulky reality of the Enterprise that Kirk, watching from the safety of the observation station, found it difficult, even with his trained and informed mind, to imagine the infernos that closer proximity would reveal them to be. It was a sight which never failed to fill him with a strange mixture of pride and humility.

These thoughts and feelings were but momentary. The shuttlecraft entered the bay in seeming silence, and when the outer doors were closed, air was pumped into the chamber. When the all clear was given, the doors ceremoniously opened, and men from security formed a guard of honour. For this was no ordinary visitor who was being piped aboard.

Kirk waited by the doorway as the physician Hod left the shuttlecraft, followed by several assistants and lastly by the stretcher-borne patient who was to be operated on. This was none other than the oldest son of the Tellarite head of state, who had become ill while doing fieldwork on a remote planet only minimally colonised by the Tellarites. No facilities existed there for the necessary operation, so Hod had been specially transported to meet the young Tellarite, and the facilities of the Enterprise had been placed at Hod's disposal.

"Dr. Hod? I am Captain James T. Kirk, in command of the Enterprise."

"I know," said Hod in a bored voice.

Kirk was somewhat taken aback; however, he firmly held on to his diplomatic mask and tone. "Is this your medical team, Dr. Hod?"

"Of course." Hod motioned towards four other Tellarites. "The finest in the galaxy."

"Well, Doctor, I'll show you to sickbay. Everything is ready. Dr. McCoy, my... "

"Sickbay, Captain?" Hod interrupted.

Kirk was this time quite surprised. "Well, I naturally assumed... "

"But surely refreshments are laid on first?" Hod asked; the other Tellarites began to mutter about feeling hungry and common courtesy and the like. Kirk looked about him in dismay, seeking inspiration. "But your patient, Doctor... ?"

"He," said the Tellarite with an airy gesture, "can wait in sickbay."

"But my senior medical officer is waiting!"

"Then by all means let him wait in sickbay too. Captain, I grow weary of this banter. Kindly lead the way to the refreshments."

"I don't care if you've got the president of the U.F.P. Council himself in there, Jim!" McCoy's voice boomed from the intercom. Kirk glanced helplessly around the hastily transformed rec room, where yeomen were serving hastily prepared refreshments to Dr. Hod and his aides. Luckily the chief medical officer's voice went unnoticed amidst the chatter and rattle of plates.

"I don't know if you realise it, Jim," McCoy was shouting, "but there's one very seriously sick Tellarite in my sickbay! Critically sick! I could even go so far as to say he's dying! He must be operated on immediately, his vital readings are dropping every second. Whilst that - that quack sits there feasting and making merry!"

"Bones, I am fully aware of that. But Dr. Hod has had a long journey, he feels he has to refresh himself before attempting such delicate surgery."

"Oh sure! And another thing! Do you know six of my nurses are looking after this sick Tellarite and not one of them has had any training in Tellarite medicine? Neither have I, beyond the basics! That patient might die while I'm speaking to you, and you make excuses...!"

"Doctor, I do sympathise with you. But Dr. Hod..."

"Just who does he think he is, anyway? His name's Hod, not God! Here's my sickbay - my sickbay - all ready for Tellarite surgery, my entire medical crew scrubbed up ready and waiting..."

"Look, Bones, I really can't talk now..."

"Oh sure, that's right! Shut me up! I've a damn' good mind to come right along down there myself and just have me a feast too, and let this pig-faced Tellarite die!"

"I'm sorry, Doctor." Kirk adopted his coldest, most commanding voice. "I know it's an inconvenience, but you'll just have to stand by. Kirk out."

"Great!" McCoy muttered into the dead intercom. "Let's just hope the patient knows he has to stand by and postpone dying!"

Eventually Dr. Hod and his team were persuaded to make their reluctant way to sickbay where, to Kirk's profound relief, McCoy was still at the ready. As an additional bonus, the Tellarite patient was still alive. Kirk introduced Hod and McCoy, but the former seemed more interested in the actual sickbay.

"Is this the best a Federation Starship can do?" he inquired in lofty surprise. "I take it this is the main medical centre? Rather archaic, wouldn't you say? I must speak to my government about it."

McCoy was seething and about to erupt; Kirk hastily stepped between the two physicians.

"Your patient is here, Dr. Hod," he said quickly, to cut off McCoy's retort.

"Thank you. I take it everything is in readiness, Dr. McCloud?"

"McCoy!" Bones shouted. "And everything's been ready three and a half hours!"

"If you are labouring under the misapprehension that I am deaf, Dr McCoy -"

"You will be needing Dr. McCoy, of course, Dr. Hod?" Kirk interposed with all alacrity. But Hod was too busy conferring with his aides to pay attention to Kirk. McCoy, his countenance now of purplish hue, pushed Kirk aside and grabbed the Tellarite's arm.

"Just how many of my personnel will you be needing?" he asked testily. Hod looked surprised.

"Your personnel? Why, none! I have all my assistants here. Of course, if you would care to stay as an observer, McRoy, you might learn a great deal."

McCoy was speechless with rage. With an inarticulate growl he ripped off his surgical gown and flung it onto the floor, then spun on his heel and stormed out.

Hod did not even appear to notice.

"Captain Kirk," said a Tellarite voice from the intercom some time later, "Dr. Hod wishes me to report that the operation was, of course, a success. The patient is sleeping, and Dr. Hod is resting in the temporary quarters you assigned him."

"Thank you," Kirk replied with an inward sigh of relief.

"We will be leaving your ship in one hour."

"Well, that's that," Kirk remarked to Mr. Spock, who was standing beside Kirk's command chair. "Then I suppose I shall have to placate Dr. McCoy."

"Indeed, Captain," Spock agreed, "even I can appreciate that the Doctor has been put to considerable inconvenience and annoyance."

"Yes, and it'll probably take at least a week for him to simmer down!" Kirk laughed.

So once again Kirk found himself waiting at the interior door of the shuttlecraft deck, looking out for the Tellarites. He heard the babble of their voices long before they themselves came in sight; Kirk was surprised to see only the four aides and the patient, however.

"Where is Dr. Hod?"

The Tellarites looked about them. "He will come," said one.

"Perhaps he is asleep?" suggested another.

Kirk tried the intercom, but could raise no reply from Hod's temporary quarters. Frowning, he turned to the nearest security guard. "Kroner, check Dr. Hod's quarters. He's probably too soundly asleep to hear the intercom, but he might have gone to look round the ship and lost his way."

"Aye, sir."

The seconds seemed like hours, so conscious was Kirk of their passing, and as he waited for the word from Kroner, he found to his surprise that he felt uneasy. The palms of his hands were moist, and something felt heavy in his stomach. With every passing minute, the uneasiness came closer to fear. The intercom, when it beeped, made him jump.

"Kirk here."

"Captain!" Kroner's voice was breathless, and scared. "Captain, you'd better come!"

The Tellarites and the Enterprise crewmen were all silent now; all eyes were on Kirk. Holding his voice steady with a conscious effort, the Captain asked, "What's wrong, Kroner?"

"His quarters weren't locked, sir, so I went in."

"And?" Kirk snapped.

"He's dead, sir. There's blood everywhere."

"On my way. Kirk out."

"Captain's Log, supplemental. A terrible tragedy has occurred. Dr. Hod has been found murdered in his quarters, and the murder weapon appears to have been one of Dr. McCoy's own scalpels. I have received orders from Starfleet Command to place Dr. Hod's body in cold storage, and to proceed at top speed to Starbase M71. No one is to leave or enter the ship until we reach the Starbase. I am also instructed to carry out preliminary investigations myself, and report my findings to Security Chief Podurov on arrival at Starbase M71... "

"But surely you don't believe it was Dr. McCoy?" Nurse Chapel burst out.

"And who, may I ask, are you?" Podurov, the head of U.F.P. Security, was a stern, grey-looking man, with an iron-grey crewcut and matching moustache.

"This is Nurse Christine Chapel," Kirk explained, "Dr. McCoy's senior assistant."

"I see. Well, Nurse, to answer your question - although of course it is none of your business - it is my duty to suspect everybody. Some people more than others... " The last sentence Podurov murmured softly, more to himself than to anyone else. "The body?"

"Here." Kirk opened a door to show, through a transparent viewing panel, the preserved body of the ill-fated Tellarite. "Of course, I awaited your arrival before ordering an autopsy, but it was obvious that he had been stabbed to death, straight through the heart. Must have died instantly."

"Hmmm." Podurov turned away from the refrigeration chamber. "Murder weapon?"

"That's here." Kirk handed him a sealed transparent box, containing a scalpel. "It was on the floor, beside the body. I picked it up myself, using a cloth, and sealed it in this container. No one has touched it since."

"Fingerprints?"

Kirk nodded. "The only ones on it were Dr. McCoy's." He sighed deeply. "I would say that proves nothing. It was one of McCoy's instruments, he must have handled it a hundred times; the killer could have worn gloves. But... "

"But... ?"

"We ran back the security scans. Of course it isn't routine procedure to scan private quarters, but when we have an important visitor aboard we always scan all parts of the ship. Normally these films are never viewed, out of respect for the privacy of all concerned, but they are available in case of just such an emergency as this... The evidence - well, come and see for yourself."

In the briefing room, Kirk played back the relevant section of security film on the table viewer. It showed clearly enough what had apparently taken place. Hod lay asleep on the bed in his temporary quarters. The door must have been unlocked, for after a few minutes, McCoy crept stealthily in, carrying the scalpel. He walked straight up to the sleeping Tellarite, gave one precise stab through the heart, withdrew the scalpel and dropped it on the floor, then turned and left the room.

"Do you want to see the scan of McCoy's quarters?" Kirk inquired. Podurov shook his head, and both men sat in silence for some time, the security chief lost in thought and Kirk waiting. Finally Podurov spoke.

"I understand from your report, Captain, that McCoy had a grievance against Hod, that Hod had been very rude to your surgeon, and abandoned him with a desperately sick patient, and had insulted McCoy prior to the operation."

Kirk was instantly on the defensive. "Yes, that's true, but it wouldn't make McCoy murder the Tellarite. You see, I know McCoy well, and he's a words man - he loves verbal arguments, tussles with words - but that's as far as it goes. He works off any bad feelings in words. Physical aggression - no, never."

"Never - until now." Podurov ran back the film, watched it through again. "Could it be an imposter? I don't know your surgeon. Could you swear, under oath, that the murderer on the film is McCoy?"

Kirk shrugged. "If I'm to be truthful... it's a damn' good imposter if it is one." Suddenly angry, he slammed his fist down on the table. "Hell, how can it be McCoy?"

"McCoy is in the brig?"

"Yes. I recorded his statement as soon as I'd seen the scans. Do you want to hear it?"

"No. I'll speak to him myself first."

Later, Kirk found Podurov back in the briefing room, turning off McCoy's statement as recorded by Kirk, to which he had just been listening. "Exactly what he told me, Captain. He was feeling tired, his head ached, so he went back to sickbay and took a painkiller, then lay down on his bunk in his quarters. He fell asleep, had some strange dreams which he can't remember. Next thing he knew, he was being awakened to be told of Hod's murder."

"You've seen the scan of his quarters?"

"Yes, and it tallies with his story up to where he lies down to sleep. Then after a few minutes we see him leave his quarters, quite normally, and later return and again lie down and sleep until he is awakened."

"McCoy wouldn't lie!"

"No-one's saying he is. His story could well be perfectly true as he remembers it. Except that he didn't fall asleep the first time he lay down. He murdered Hod instead. His mind has suppressed the memory of his action. It's a well-known phenomenon. If a memory would be too distressing, the mind sometimes suppresses it completely. McCoy's mind has suppressed the memory of the murder, and all he has is a blank, which he interprets - wrongly - as his having been asleep all the time."

"It's all too facile," Kirk said slowly. "It's too like a frame-up."

Podurov shrugged. "Good officer, is he?" His voice was sympathetic.

"He's also my friend," Kirk said quietly.

"But you can't deny that the facts are damning."

"The apparent facts."

The only facts we have to go on. McCoy will have to be transferred to the detention centre on Starbase M71."

Two days later, Kirk stood rather ill-at-ease in Podurov's splendid office on Starbase M71. The Security Chief looked up from the papers he was working on.

"Captain Kirk. Sit down." He waited politely until the Captain had seated himself in the shiny imitation leather armchair. "You know, of course, about the Tellarite government? Raising hell."

Kirk nodded. "I imagined they would."

"Can't imagine the extent of their protests. Demanding the works - official enquiry, arrests, reports, investigations, trials - I'm afraid, also, convictions, Captain."

"What exactly do you mean by 'convictions'?"

Podurov looked away. "If the case isn't cleared up," he said with uncharacteristic hesitation, "if the - murderer - isn't convicted, there could be an

interplanetary incident. And when I say 'incident', that hardly describes it! You know politicians, trouble they cause. Could mean a split in the Federation; could even mean war."

Kirk stared hard at Podurov. "So what you're in fact saying is that, guilty or innocent, Dr. McCoy must be convicted to avoid an interplanetary incident?"

"Weigh it in the balance, Captain. What's one man, compared to the havoc of full-scale interplanetary war?"

"It's the principle involved!" Kirk's voice was rising, although he was trying hard not to show his anger. "There's no absolute proof! You would wrongfully convict an innocent man...!"

"The facts don't suggest he's innocent."

"The apparent facts! There must be some other explanation! McCoy was framed!"

"So you said before. But evidence, Captain. Where is your evidence? A hunch will not hold up in a courtmartial."

"I'll find evidence," Kirk said bitterly. "I'll get you your evidence, Podurov."

Podurov pointed a cautionary finger. "Keep out of this, Kirk. Don't moddle in things that are far above you. This is not your Starship and 430 people. It's a galaxy full of billions of lives that's at stake."

"The ideas of justice and friendship are not, as you put it, far above me." Kirk's tone was stoney, his face set in defiance. "When is the courtmartial set for?"

"Three weeks tomorrow. But let me warn you... "

"You shall have all the evidence of McCoy's innocence that you need by three weeks today. Or else my resignation. Now if you will excuse me... "

"You're a fool, Kirk!" But Podurov's words bounced back off the closed door. Slowly he reached down and turned off the tape recorder that had preserved an accurate record of his conversation with the Starship Captain. For Kirk, there could be no turning back.

* * * *

PART 2

Once back aboard the Enterprise, Kirk's plan of action seemed to him obvious. He checked and found that the whole crew was entitled to a month's shore leave, so he had a rota devised with all speed, ensuring that his own name appeared amongst those to leave immediately. When the arrangements had been made for the first shore leave party to be accommodated on Starbase M71, Kirk, with an expression of satisfaction, summoned his First Officer to his quarters.

"You wished to see me, Captain?"

"Ah, Mr. Spock. Come in." This was a delicate matter, and Kirk was unsure how to broach it. A circuitous route seemed indicated. "I've put you down for the first shore leave party. Just thought I'd let you know."

"I am already aware of the fact, Captain. However, I do not at present feel the need to take so protracted a vacation."

"You're taking it," Kirk informed him amicably. "That's an order."

Spock raised an eyebrow. "I see, sir. I therefore imagine that you have plans for your shore leave which include me."

"Right. Look, Spock," Kirk glanced almost guiltily about the room, his voice automatically dropping; he still felt subconsciously as if a tape recorder was eavesdropping. "I haven't had a chance to tell you the full story of what

happened when I beamed down to see Podurov."

"I am aware of what the records state."

"The official records, yes. But what I omitted from my official report was that I promised Podurov that on the day before McCoy's trial I would give him either firm proof of McCoy's innocence or my resignation."

Vulcan eyebrows shot up. "I see. And I presume you intend to use this hastily engineered shore leave as a period in which to investigate the case?" There was a note of disapproval there, which Kirk did not fail to detect, and it startled him; no, more, it stung him.

"You know what Podurov said about a conviction, Spock!"

"Yes, Captain."

"And you agree with him?" More bewilderment.

"I did not say that."

"No, but by disapproving of my plans you imply as much!"

"Captain." Spock's eyes, meeting Kirk's, were pleading. "Jim. You cannot pit yourself against the whole machinery of U.F.P. procedure alone, and win. No one man could. You do battle, not merely with Podurov, but with a galaxy full of governments, heads of state and important representatives of races. No one man.. "

"So you keep saying, Spock, but I have to try. Not just for Bones, although he's a first-class officer and a good friend. For the principle involved. Whatever your personal opinion of McCoy is, surely you can understand that?"

Spock nodded once. "You would hazard your career, possibly your liberty, for this?"

"Wouldn't you?"

"Failure is inevitable, Jim, if you, or you and I, attempt this unaided. On what do you base your case, besides your knowledge of McCoy's personality?"

Kirk looked hard at Spock. Never in his wildest dreams had he anticipated this. Surely Vulcan loyalty and integrity could not allow Spock to see any man unjustly accused. Kirk felt his only hope was to try reason. "Well, for a start, why did McCoy - if it was McCoy - leave the scalpel behind? Why not clean it and put it away, or destroy it? Why not wear gloves, or wipe off the prints? It points at a frame-up."

Spock would not be drawn. "Perhaps."

"And secondly, how could McCoy know that Hod was in his quarters sleeping?"

"He followed the Tellarite, waited for a suitable time, then tried the door buzzer. On receiving no reply, he assumed Hod was asleep. Had he been in error, he could easily have fabricated some excuse."

"How did McCoy get the scalpel from sickbay without being seen?"

"He quietly removed it whilst in sickbay getting the painkiller for his headache. After the operation, all attention would be focused on the Tellarite patient, and McCoy could easily act unobserved. It would also require a medical-skilled person to locate so precisely the Tellarite heart."

"Why are you so hell-bent on condemning McCoy?" Kirk shouted, slamming his fist down on the table. Spock did not react perceptibly to the violence of the sudden outburst.

"I am merely trying to dissuade you from ruining yourself in a vain cause, Jim. Who could impersonate McCoy so excellently on the security scan? That is the damning fact, and no amount of incidental evidence will outweigh it."

"He was drugged, then. Or hypnotised."

"Immediate tests revealed no drug. It would be very difficult as the situation stands now to prove one was used. The same applies to hypnosis. Furthermore, Jim, the security scan of McCoy's cabin shows that the Doctor was absent from his quarters during the time that the murder was committed, and left and returned to his cabin quite normally, apparently quite in control of his actions."

"Damn it all, man, you think he did it!"

Spock calmly shook his head. "I only think it highly probable that Dr. McCoy will be convicted, despite the best efforts of any number of amateur detectives, unless..."

"Get out!" Kirk was on his feet, fists clenched. Rage and anguish blinded him to something in Spock's eyes that he would otherwise have noticed, for he was usually very sensitive to the half-Vulcan's slight expressions.

"Jim..."

"Get out, mister!!!" Kirk yelled.

"Jim, if..."

"I'm not going to tell you again, Vulcan! Get out and stay out!"

Silently, Spock turned and walked out.

When the door had closed, Kirk began to pace the room, fists still so tightly clenched that his fingernails cut into his palms. He had never expected this. Whatever their overt behaviour suggested, Kirk was certain surgeon and First Officer had a secret, healthy respect for each other, and a good deal of mutual sympathy and understanding. And he couldn't believe Spock could stand by and let any man be unfairly treated. Desperately though he tried, he could not understand Spock's response; all that was obvious was that, after all they had been through together, and just when he needed all of Spock's qualities most, his friend had apparently let him down.

But time was too precious to waste it brooding on what might have been. Quickly he packed a small holdall, for he anticipated a good deal of travelling, and as he packed, his thoughts raced.

His discussion with Spock had at least served to clarify his reasoning. Bones it must have been who had committed the murder, but it was now too late to prove that he had been either hypnotised or drugged by using any symptom or evidence arising from McCoy himself. So Kirk's only hope seemed to be to find the perpetrator of the deed, and extract a confession. Excluding McCoy, no one on the ship could have held a grudge against Hod, so the most likely suspects were the Tellarite aides who had accompanied Hod. It was these Tellarites that Kirk intended to get hold of. Fortunately for Kirk, they had all been subpoenaed to appear at the courtmartial, and must remain on Starbase M71 during the intervening three weeks, so the hotel at the Starbase was Kirk's first destination.

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PART 3

On leaving the Captain's quarters, Mr. Spock walked straight to his own. He was grateful that he met no-one on the way. Once safely inside, he locked the door and sat down near his table. He made steeples of his fingers, his eyes unseeing.

He had expected Kirk to see and to understand what he had been able to express only with his eyes... no, on second thought, perhaps not. The expression 'blind with rage' could be literally true for Humans, Spock knew. And when he had attempted to express it in words, he found he had left it too late; Kirk would not, could not, listen.

Spock had also been thinking very deeply about Hod's murder, but he had found it easier to accept that McCoy had actually committed the crime, whilst

not acting under his own volition for some reason. Long before it had occurred to Kirk, Spock had suspected that one or more of Hod's Tellarite aides must have been responsible.

But his thoughts had run in the opposite direction to Kirk's from there. Instead of trying to track the future movements of the Tellarites, Spock had examined their past lives. He could almost certainly rule out hypnosis, for Tellarites did not normally make use of this skill. He thought a drug far more probable; but either a drug that was undetectable to the Enterprise's medical equipment, therefore having its origin outside the planets of the Federation, or a newly invented, rapidly acting drug which had left McCoy's bloodstream by the time tests were conducted. For it seemed that McCoy must have been somehow drugged (if this hypothesis were true) after he left his cabin slightly before Hod was murdered, immediately murdered Hod, and was back to normal by the time he returned to his quarters, except that he had no memory of what he had done whilst drugged. This was theoretically possible, Spock thought, but the drug must have been perfected extremely recently, and unpublicised, for McCoy kept up-to-date with the journals.

Spock's investigations during the previous night, when he could operate the computer unobserved, revealed that none of the Tellarites in question, including Hod, had been conducting research during the past year. So whoever had obtained and used the drug had had it supplied to him, by a person or persons unknown as yet.

Including Hod, for there was always the possibility, remote though it seemed, that Hod had engineered his own death, Spock had traced the histories of the Tellarites concerned over the past year, using the computer.

Amongst the myriad happenings of five people's lives during that time, Spock discovered one interesting fact.

Three months previously, and also six months prior to that, conferences had been held concerning medical and other issues of interest to different races. Purely by coincidence, these conferences had been held on planets extremely close to the U.F.P. - Romulan neutral zone. Hod and two of his assistants had attended these conferences.

It was tempting to jump to conclusions, especially as a scan of the remaining data showed no other events of any likely significance.

The ship's computer did not have access to anything beyond the barest summaries of what had taken place at these conferences. Full records would be filed away on every U.F.P. member planet, but could only be consulted by authorised personnel.

Spock was not so authorised; but he knew his father could obtain access to those files.

It would not be easy. For a start, it would mean going home, to Vulcan, and Spock was unsure of the reception he would receive. Secondly, to obtain his father's co-operation he would have to persuade Sarek that more was at stake than the future of one Starship surgeon. That might be difficult, when the only thing he had to go on was one of those hunches he so deplored in Humans. Thirdly, there was the problem of getting to Vulcan; he would have to - ahem - 'borrow' a shuttlecraft. He could not, in all conscience, involve his Captain in this last scheme, and he knew that the presence of anyone else while he tried to persuade his father to help might be just the thing to make Sarek refuse.

Spock had decided upon his course of action before he received his summons to Kirk's quarters. He had already resolved not to tell Kirk of his plans; and he had wanted to dissuade Jim from risking his career and reputation so blatantly, and then conduct the investigations himself, in his own way. Logically, his plan stood a greater chance of success than any of Kirk's could, and he preferred to hazard his own good name and protect his friend's, if at all possible. But Kirk's reactions did not affect Spock's plans. He did not know the Captain's

own ideas, only that he, too, would act.

"Get out, Vulcan, and stay out!" Spock pushed the words and their accompanying sensations out of his conscious mind. How easy it is, he thought bitterly, to see our errors in retrospect. But he could not change what had happened. He packed a bag, then put through a call to the crewman on duty on the shuttlecraft deck.

"Prepare for your shore leave, Mr. Carlotti. I will send a crewman to relieve you."

"Thank you, Mr. Spock!" Carlotti was surprised, but too pleased to question the First Officer's order. The shuttlecraft deck was pleasantly devoid of Human life when Mr. Spock arrived, carrying his bag.

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PART 4

Mr. Spock landed the shuttlecraft neatly in the courtyard of the house that had been his home when he was much younger. He was almost reluctant to open the door of the vehicle and descend into the heavy Vulcan heat haze. He had not been able to warn his parents in advance of his impending arrival, and there was an unaccustomed feeling in the pit of his stomach which a Human would have called 'nerves' but which a half-Vulcan must refuse to admit to.

Slowly, he stepped out into the bright sunlight.

A door opened at the far side of the courtyard and Sarek, wondering at the unusual sound, stood framed in the doorway, surrounded by cool shade.

"Spock." His voice registered no surprise, just a question; one eyebrow was raised.

"I trust that the sound of my arrival did not startle you," Spock said politely, more for something to break the ice than for any other reason.

"I was working on some papers," the older Vulcan replied. "I wondered at the noise."

Spock had been walking slowly forward; now he was face to face with his father.

"You are unwell?" Sarek asked, and Spock realised, with slight astonishment, that Sarek was in fact quite worried. He shook his head.

"No, I am quite well. I wish to consult you on a matter of urgency... it is really quite presumptuous of me..." He felt horribly like running back to the shuttlecraft and leaving with all alacrity. But Sarek held out his hand in a gesture unusual for him, which Spock found strangely touching.

"You are welcome," he said simply. "Come in."

Amanda was out visiting friends, so in the cool airiness of Sarek's home, father and son were able to sit over a refreshing drink undisturbed, whilst Spock explained the purpose of his visit.

It was far easier than he had anticipated. He told the story straight through, as it had happened, then explained his and Kirk's various theorisings, and finally his own ideas and proposed plans, giving his logical reasons.

When Spock was at last silent, Sarek sat lost in thought for several minutes without speaking. Eventually he looked towards his son. "If what you hypothesize is in any measure correct," he said, thoughtfully, "issues of far-reaching galactic importance are at stake."

"I could be in error."

Sarek nodded. "It would simplify matters if you were." He raised one eyebrow. "Knowing you as I do, however, I doubt it."

Spock inclined his head in acknowledgement.

"This matter must be investigated with all possible haste," Sarek continued, "and also with all possible secrecy. I shall obtain copies of the relevant files and we will peruse them together. I think it best that you come with me to my office tomorrow."

"I am not authorised to see such files," Spock pointed out. Sarek's eyebrows shot up.

"There are certain times when logic decrees that even the strictest rules be broken." His gaze turned by chance (or was it?) out through the window to where the shuttlecraft shimmered in the heat. "Of course, I know that you are aware of that."

In the coolness of the evening, Amanda came home to find her husband and her son playing chess together. Amanda had taught Sarek this game, and, like his son, he enjoyed it.

"Spock!" she cried. Spock stood up, and took the hands that she held out. "Oh, Spock, I didn't know..." She stepped back, his hands still in hers, and looked him up and down. "How are you? You look tired."

"I am well, thank you." His voice had automatically assumed the gentler tone that he reserved for a very few, very fortunate people. "I had far to travel."

"It's lovely to see you!" Amanda said happily. "Have you eaten? I didn't think so! Sarek, what are you thinking of?" she teased.

"I saw no reason to attempt to compete with your haute cuisine!" Sarek replied, understanding the intended joke.

"I'll go and get you both something!" Amanda laughed, and headed for the kitchen.

Ambassador Himalaya of Oranea pulled his brown felt hat, battered and discoloured with age, over his long snout covered with grey fur, and his brown beady eyes. Somehow he implanted this simple movement with a great deal of meaning. He tugged reflectively at one long furry ear.

"No," he said quite amiably, in his own personal broken English, "I am gorrry, old triend, but - no. It ig too mush 'ard work, too mush rusharound. It ig all far too mush work."

"Your English has improved, Himalaya," Sarek commented. The two ambassadors had been friends for years.

"Yeg!" Himalaya was pleased.

"Regrettably, your enthusiasm for industry has not followed suit."

"Ha!" Himalaya snorted, and banged a furry paw on the table, making the coffee cups rattle. "Why can you not go, eh, and leave a poor 'ard-workin' ambaggador in peag?"

"I have already explained that," Sarek replied resignedly. "If I travel to the Tellarite Capital University and my son accompanies me, it will appear suspicious to those involved in this plot. They without doubt must have their connections also, and will be looking for any activity connected with the late Dr. Hod. But if he accompanies you..."

"And ju't 'ow do we get there, eh?" Himalaya's eyes lit up at a suspected flaw in the Vulcan's plans. "Tellarite' are very gu... gush... shushpishush. When we take a 'cheduled public gervish 'light, they will begin to wonder, agk too many awkward que'tion. My delicate con'titution may not 'tand it." As if to emphasise his point, Himalaya selected the largest slice of cake from the plate on the table and devoured it in two mouthfuls.

"Then you can use a private ship," Sarek said tranquilly.

"And where will I get that?"

"You have connections," Sarek replied pleasantly.

"I?" Himalaya heaved his bulky and massive frame upright in the chair, which creaked in protest. His silky grey fur quivered over his every inch with indignation. "Me? I will 'ave you know, Garek of Vulcan, I am a respectable Orinian Ambaggador, full of up'tanding and ighteoughnegg and Ea'tern Promig and all other degirable quality!"

"Eastern Promise?" Sarek inquired, fascinated.

"Yeg! I 'ave geen it in advertigment on Earth. You eat it, and beautiful maiden run agter you. Very degirable!"

"I see." Sarek thought it wisest not to pursue this matter; he would ask Amanda about it later. "And as I was saying, you have connections."

"Who do you mean?" innocently.

"I think you know."

"Ha!" Himalaya tugged gloomily at his long striped scarf, which, besides his hat, was his only article of clothing. "But what good will it do ug to vigit this damn univergity any old 'ow?"

"Dr. Hod's private records will be filed at the university. They may throw a more conclusive light on what actually occurred at those conferences than the official tapes do. It seems possible that Hod may have used these opportunities to arrange secret meetings with Romulan agents."

"And 'e wrote all this down for po'terity, o' courg!" Himalaya interrupted sarcastically.

Sarek, with dignity, ignored this outburst. "Once you arrive, Spock will do whatever becomes necessary. You need only relax, eat, drink, and enjoy your visit."

"Then why needg me go at all?" plaintively.

"To furnish Spock with the opportunity to accompany you."

Himalaya sighed deeply. "You know, Garek mon vieux ami, you talk too damn mush. Hokay! I will arrange it. But it will be ekpenshiv, I warn you."

"And you will also arrange for someone to take the shuttlecraft that Spock borrowed back to Starbase M71?"

"Formore of Amanda' beautiful cake, anything can be arranged!"

"Well? Watcha tink?"

"It ig beautiful, Don Alto."

"T'ortcha'd like it. Lucky!"

"Yeah, Boss?"

"Ya ready ta go?"

"Sure ting, Boss!"

"Den le's shoot!"

"Sure ting, Boss."

Don Alto Petrinelli sat back in one of the luxurious seats of the private craft he had just appropriated from a private parking ground on a small planet in the backwoods of the galaxy. Pedro and Lucky, two of his 'boys' were, from experience, versatile pilots, and having collected Spock and Himalaya at Vulcan, they were now ready to lay in a course for the Tallarite capital city.

"Nekt 'top, nignog univergity!" Himalaya sighed peacefully.

"You must excuse him," Spock remarked. "He is extremely racially prejudiced, although probably the most tactful of the Orinian race."

"All a load og ungviligid wiggy-woggig!" Himalaya declared. "All very... very..." His voice trailed away into a snore.

"He has had a long day," Spock explained apologetically to Don Alto.

"Is O.K., kid. Him 'n me, we long-time buddies. I know him like my own brudder. He has his hang-ups, same as all of us."

"And do you also know my father well?" Spock asked with interest.

Don Alto adjusted the white silk tie that stood in stark contrast to his black shirt, then the carnation in the buttonhole of his pin-striped suit. It was all done for effect, as Spock well knew.

"Your pa. Yeah." Don Alto flicked imaginary lint from his Al Capone hat, which rested on his knee. "Ya see where I am now? I keep twenty boys in a job, plenty a small operations, one or two big ones, money ain't no problem. I even got a dooplicate of Al Capone's car, specially made. I got a name t'roughout the galaxy, not as a villain but jest as a character. Well, your pa was one o' the ones helped me git where I am now. Ya mebbe don't reckon it as much, but I'm content. So I repay a little, O.K.?"

Spock nodded.

"He tell ya da story?"

Spock shook his head.

"Mebbe some day, kid." Don Alto lit a long and prosperous-looking cigar, eyeing Spock closely through the cloud of blue smoke. "Ya surprised?"

"A little, I must confess."

Don Alto nodded. "Mebbe ya don't know ya pa as good as ya tink in some ways, eh, kid? Besides, he's a smart guy. Reckon he knew he'd need a return favour off of me an' mah boys some day, an' - " he waved an arm round to take in the spacecraft, " - here it is! Besides, Sarek once gave me a good compliment. D'ya know what he said I was? 'Colourful'! I like dat! 'Colourful'!"

Himalaya opened one beady eye. "Shut up! he said pleasantly. "'ow do you ekpect a poor 'ard-workin' ambaggador to get gum eye-shut when you two chitter-chatter like pair of old woman-washer?"

"Some shut-eye," corrected Don Alto, and

"Old washer-women," corrected Spock, simultaneously.

Himalaya's only response was a further snore.

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PART 5

A cold, grey day; the city covered by a light fall of snow, which was still white on the rooftops and pockmarked by birds' feet, but was grey slush in the streets, kicked up by countless feet. Pedestrians trudged to and fro, women laden with shopping and with children in tow, men with briefcases and other men with working tools. Traffic, slowed by the weather conditions, crawled lazily. There were all the sounds of a city day, too; voices, klaxons, engines, feet, children shouting and crying.

Dr. McCoy thought himself lucky to have been assigned a cell in the outer circumference of the detention centre. Although his cell was some eight storeys above the street, the barred and reinforced window commanded an interesting and rewarding view of the city.

It was the only thing about his situation which the doctor regarded as fortunate.

The sound of the double, securilocked doors opening drew his attention away from the window. The Starfleet defense attorney who had been appointed to deal with McCoy's case stood in the doorway, a turnkey behind him.

"Good morning, Doctor."

He was a pleasant young fellow, McCoy reflected, with a well nigh impossible task. He raised a hand, and nodded a greeting. Goodson, the attorney, waved the goaler away.

"Have a seat," McCoy offered, a touch of irony in his voice. "How goes it?"

Goodson sat down on the bunk, and sighed. He took a bundle of papers from his briefcase, shuffled them rather aimlessly, and dropped them onto the bedside table. "It doesn't, if I'm to be truthful."

"By all means. Be truthful."

"Look, McCoy," Goodson bristled, "it's no good taking that attitude with me. This whole damn' mess isn't my fault!"

"No more is it mine!"

"Then who the hell's is it?"

"You tell me!" McCoy retorted angrily. "The Tellarites', as I see it!"

"Proof!" Goodson shouted. "I've told you a thousand times! I have to have proof! And the only thing I have to date is a security film showing you murdering the Tellarite!"

McCoy had turned his back with an angry exclamation; now he stood for some minutes gazing out of the window at the scene below, blue eyes irate yet also hurt. Goodson, embarrassed, resumed his shuffling of papers. At last, McCoy turned back to face the lawyer.

"Look, I'm sorry," he said gruffly, his Georgia accent thicker than usual. "It's being penned up like this. It's driving me mad."

Goodson nodded. "I know." There was sympathy in his tone. "And I know this is a sore subject, but I still think insanity is your best plea."

"No, damn it! I'm not insane, and I never was! No way!"

"But you say yourself that you remember nothing. Nervous breakdown? Amnesia? You're the doctor, Doctor, you tell me!"

McCoy merely shook his head. Goodson collected up his papers and thrust them into his briefcase. "Until you come up with some fresh evidence or change your plea to insanity, I can be of no further help to you. I can say you don't remember murdering Hod, I can call character witnesses. But that's all. Good day, Doctor. Guard! Let me out, please."

McCoy hardly heard Goodson leave, or the doors close and lock. He was back at the window again, gazing out with unseeing eyes.

Evidence, the lawyer had said. And by all that was holy, evidence he would have.

But how?

Jim. Where was Jim? That was McCoy's first thought. In all the time he had been imprisoned, who had visited him. Sulu and Chekov, on shore leave. They had been three times. They had told McCoy that Kirk and Spock were both on shore leave too, and Scotty was in command, which was why the latter had not visited the prisoner. Later, Lt. Uhura and Christine Chapel had both been. But the two people Bones would have numbered, no, make that ranked prominently amongst his friends were conspicuous by their absence. The very two who had the influence and could pull the strings.

I can't believe Jim would desert me.

No, that could never be. In all the time they had known one another, Jim had always been loyal, as Bones had been loyal. Jim must be away, conducting investigations, pursuing his own trails and clues. But why hadn't he looked in, to give the sufferer some hope, however small. Can it be that Jim thinks I'm guilty? I can't believe that.

And Spock?

With Spock, the process would be quite different. Jim's conduct would be emotional; loyalty to a friend vs. loyalty to Starfleet. But Spock's would not be like that. McCoy could picture the half-Vulcan sitting alone, somewhere quiet, weighing up the facts - No, McCoy corrected himself, the logical facts! - balancing the two sides, reaching a verdict. If he decides I'm innocent he'll act; by heaven, he'll act, and effectively too, if I know my man! (Memories of Chris Pike and Talos IV rushed unbidden to the surface of McCoy's mind and made him grin.) A good man to have on your side in a crisis.

But if he decides I'm guilty?

McCoy turned wearily away from the window and sat down on the bunk. They had not visited him. They had done nothing to give him hope. He had no way of knowing what they had decided or were doing. But each day brought the trial nearer. He couldn't afford to wait.

From under his pillow he drew out some sheets of paper - he was allowed most conveniences - and read through what he had jotted down. He had spent a great deal of time trying to induce memory and recall what he had actually done the day Hod was murdered. He remembered storming into his quarters extremely angrily after the scene with Hod in sickbay, throwing off his surgical attire. He remembered a headache setting in, caused no doubt by his angry outburst, so he had returned to sickbay, taken a painkiller, then lain down on his bed in his quarters. He must have dozed; and then he was certain he had a vague remembrance of leaving his quarters and walking somewhere, urgently, and of a face and a voice, that could easily have belonged to a Tellarite, telling him something, and of coughing, fighting to breathe, and then suddenly feeling at peace.

It could be true. Or it could be a half-remembered dream, or merely wishful thinking. He had told no-one, for it only seemed to incriminate him further. But he had to find out the truth. He could, and would, find that Tellarite. If he existed in reality and not merely in McCoy's mind, he must have been one of Hod's assistants, in which case he would still be here, on Starbase M71, waiting like McCoy for the trial.

No sooner conceived than enacted. McCoy pressed the intercom switch.

"Guard? Could you come in here one minute, please?"

The old dodge worked like magic; the guard had come to trust the quiet doctor. As he opened the door, McCoy doubled up as if ill. As the guard rushed to help him, McCoy knocked him out, switched clothes and was away.

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PART 6

Lucky Marciano, Don Alto's right-hand man, stood in the doorway of the office that had been Dr. Hod's, hefting his Sten-gun nervously.

"Caintcha move no quicker?" he demanded at last. "This place gives me da willies."

"I am working with all possible alacrity," Mr. Spock replied in preoccupied tones. "It is essential that I decipher those notes."

"Are dey in code?" Lucky asked with interest.

"No, simply shorthand."

"Oh." Disappointed, Lucky turned back to his scrutiny of the corridor.

Spock continued to scan paper after paper, working his way in a logical sequence through drawer after drawer, file after file. Lucky chewed gum, and occasionally whistled tunelessly through his teeth.

"Hurry up, caintcha?"

"I believe," Spock said slowly, "that I have discovered something of significance." He shone his flashlight about the dark room.

"Wotcha looking for now?"

"There must be other files, where Hod's assistants keep their notes and papers."

"Dere was filin' cabinets in da next room also. Why?"

"Mention is made repeatedly of Hod's 'research trips'. This is always in inverted commas, and I take it to be a disguised name for secret meetings with Romulan agents. There are no details of these meetings, nothing to substantiate my theory, but it seems significant that it was always the same assistant, Jat, who accompanied the doctor. Jat was also aboard the Enterprise when Hod was killed. The proof may be contained in Jat's papers."

Lucky crossed the room, peered out between the slats of the drawn blind, surveying the deserted night-time campus. Then he followed Spock out of the office, and carefully locked the door with his skeleton key.

"Archaic offices dese Tellarites have," he remarked. "Thumbprint locks're far easier to fool."

"Are they?" Spock asked in surprise.

"Sure. Ya tells da punk t'use his thumb t'open the door. If he refuses, ya forgets about da punk and jest borrows da thumb. Ya see what I mean?"

Spock nodded, one eyebrow quizzically raised.

They walked by flashlight to the next room, and Lucky pointed out the files with a wave of his weapon. "Dat's dem."

"So I observe." Spock began by reading the names on the drawers. Finding the one he sought, he quickly opened it, breaking the lock with a skilful flick of a wrist whose slimness belied its strength. He began to work through more papers.

"Hey!"

Spock ignored this and continued to search.

"Someone's outside!"

Spock lowered his light a little. "Ah."

"Ya got it?"

"I believe so."


"Den le's split."

"Yes, these papers give details of... "

"Ssshhh!" Lucky grabbed Spock's flashlight and extinguished its glow. "Some punk's comin'."

They crouched close to the wall, with a desk between them and the door. Sure enough, the outer door at the end of the corridor could be heard stealthily closing. Spock, in the gloom, signalled to Lucky to remain where he was, while he himself crept round to stand just inside the door, pressed against the wall.

Cautious footsteps crept along the corridor towards them, paused, then continued. The two men waiting were poised ready, and Lucky's uneasiness was betrayed by his gentle tugging at his heavy black moustache.



As the unknown visitor stepped through the doorway, Lucky made himself visible, gun at the ready.

"One move an' ya dead," he warned softly.

The man leaped forward. Lucky sidestepped, Spock moved rapidly and caught the intruder from behind with a Vulcan nerve pinch. He crumpled into Spock's arms and was gently lowered to the floor. Lucky's torch beam played on the unconscious face.

"Ya knows dis punk?"

Spock nodded wryly. "My Captain, James T. Kirk."

Kirk opened his eyes, wincing from the seeming brightness of the room, and rubbed a hand across his face.

SPOCK

"Ya lucky," said a voice close by. "If ya friend hadn't of spoke up, ya mighta found yaself takin' a lil' swim - wit' concrete boots on."

Kirk went to sit up and fell back with a groan, rubbing his shoulder. "What happened?"

"You was lookin' for some papers, right? Well, me an' ya buddy got dere foist."

Kirk finally managed to sit up and confront Lucky on a level. "Who are you?"

"Da man in da moon!"

Kirk sighed; Lucky laughed. "Best wait till da Boss comes in. I'm paid t' keep my mouth shut, an' give punks lessons in swimmin' like I said, an' in parachuting wit'out da parachute, an' one or two other lil' skills. Dat's all."

"You could at least tell me where we're heading. I can see for myself we're aboard some kind of private spacecraft. Have I been kidnapped?"

Lucky burst out laughing. "Oh sure, sure!" Then an idea occurred to him. "Why, are ya' folks rich?"

Lucky's new train of thought was interrupted by the door of the small cabin opening.

"Jim."

Kirk's face froze. He stared in disbelief. "Not you?"

"Guess I'd best be leavin' ya to it," Lucky remarked, and beat a hasty retreat.

"You can get out too!" Kirk bawled at Spock. But his First Officer, on the contrary, came in and closed the door.

"Last time you issued that order, Jim, I obeyed. This time, I must speak to you."

"I've nothing to say to you, and you have nothing to say that I want to hear, Mister Spock."

"I believe you may retract that when I tell you my news."

Kirk was on his feet. "How did I get here?" he barked. "Where are we going, and just what is going on? And how does that - that character who just left tie in with you? Whose side are you on, anyway?"

Spock's hurt and puzzled eyes seemed to be boring into Kirk's soul. He said nothing, but waited patiently for the captain to work out his anger.

"Did that - that hoodlum jump me at the University?" Kirk was trying desperately to put the pieces together, but Spock's silence, his seeming refusal to co-operate, cut him to the quick. "Won't anything reach you? Oh God, Spock!" He sank back onto the bunk in defeat. Then - "For God's sake! Was it you at the University?" Light suddenly dawned.

"Yes, Jim."

"Why, in heaven's name? I had a clue, evidence that could have helped Bones. I got it from one of the Tellarites, it didn't involve him but someone he suspected. And then you had to ruin it all!"

"Is that what you really believe?" Spock asked softly. "Think. Why would I have been there?"

Kirk looked up at Spock, seeing him as if for the first time, in a totally new light. Suddenly it was all beginning to come clear; both what had happened and, perhaps more important for Kirk, the look in Spock's eyes.

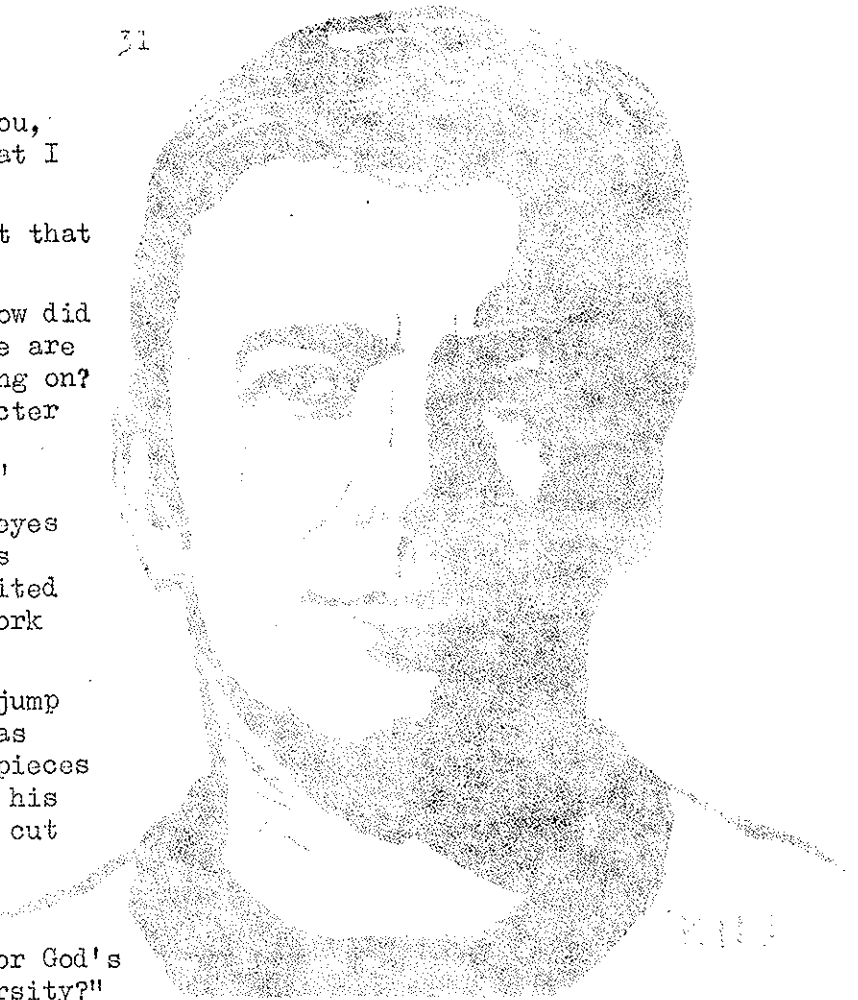
"My errand and yours were identical," Spock was continuing in the same tone. "I merely happened to arrive before you. I have the necessary documents, and we are returning to Starbase M71 to present them to Podurov. I came to inform you." He held out a sheaf of papers that Kirk had somehow not noticed before. "They make interesting reading."

Kirk would not take the papers, and when Spock saw that, he misinterpreted it as rejection, and turned slightly to leave, hunched and defeated. Kirk's heart and soul cried out "Oh, Spock!" and he stepped forward and instinctively caught the Vulcan's arm. "Don't go," he said quietly.

Spock turned, and the two men's eyes met. Kirk was still wondering what words to use, how to tell Spock of his own confusion and distress, how to say that in the stress of the moment they had each misinterpreted, misjudged and hurt the other, when he realised, from Spock's eyes, that his own eyes had said it already. Spock's hand brushed his very briefly, and then he smiled one of his rare smiles.

"Spock, I..." Kirk smiled too, apologetically, knowing that the words, whatever they turned out to be, would have been superfluous.

"It is all right, Jim. In a situation of urgency things are often overlooked which in a moment of leisure would be comprehended. We are all guilty



of that." He held out the papers again. "I would suggest that our time would be better spent in an examination of these."

Kirk grinned gratefully. "And I could use some coffee too."

* * * *

PART 7

"How did you get these papers?" Chief Podurov asked with interest.

"That's not important," Kirk said hastily. "It's what's in them that is."

"I can see that. In shorthand, of course. This is clearly the name of the organisation, and this is evidently a list of members or contacts, or something like that. Look, the names indicate members from most planets and races, scattered throughout the Federation. I'm indebted to you, Captain, these papers are invaluable."

"And the list of names includes Hod and his assistant Jat."

"Precisely. Both working for this organisation, whose aim appears to be the overthrow of the Federation and government as we know it, to be replaced by anarchy."

"Or, more probably, by whoever's financing the whole thing."

"Yes..." Podurov mused, "most likely the Romulans, although possibly the Klingons are behind it and have made it appear to be the Romulans... Anyway, their intent's plain enough."

"And Hod," continued Kirk, "was only involved for his own ends - money and fame. That's clear from the last-but-one communication with their headquarters. They were afraid he was going to betray them. So in the last communication, Jat is ordered to eliminate him."

Podurov nodded. "You know, Kirk, much as I hate to admit this, I may have been a little hasty. Of course, I still think your doctor actually killed Hod."

"But he was just a tool, a weapon."

"Quite. Drugged, I should imagine. Some new-fangled alien concoction, no doubt."

"Then this'll alter the case?"

Podurov nodded again. "He'll still be tried, of course, but this sheds quite a different light on the whole thing. Might even have gotten off scot-free."

Kirk stiffened. "What do you mean, 'might have'?"

"Unfortunately, your surgeon has himself altered his case, too. He broke gaol three days ago. Whole security force is out after him, but so far no trace."

Kirk burst into Spock's room at the hotel on Starbase M71, and at the sight of his distraught Captain Spock's relaxed look quickly became one of concern.

"Spock, McCoy's broken gaol!"

"Why?" Spock asked incredulously.

"Heaven only knows! But he's ruined everything, the dumbhead! If only he'd hung on and stayed put! Podurov admits our evidence would probably have gotten him off. But now all our work is in vain, all the risks, everything! Now what are we going to do?"

Spock's thought were racing. "It may not be too late, Jim. We may yet

reach McCoy before he seriously compromises his case."

"How? Where would he go? The security forces can't find him."

"Just as they have not found Bertha's Bar."

"Of course! Bertha's Bar, right here on this Starbase! One of the contact points for the organisation."

"Did you point this out to Podurov?"

Kirk shook his head in dismay. "I didn't think of it. I was going to, but then when he told me about McCoy I just couldn't think straight. I forgot all about it. But how would Bones find out about it?"

"He would naturally seek out the Tellarites, as you did. Where else would they stay but at this hotel? There is no other, and Jat would not wish to risk calling attention to himself by separating himself from the other Tellarites, and joining his fellow gang members."

"That's it!" Kirk slapped Spock on the back in delight. "Bones would find Jat here, get him to tell him about Bertha's Bar. If I'd taken more time, I might have gotten on to Jat too, in the first place, but it's too late to worry about that now. I'll call Podurov."

He ran to the communications panel, and was precious minutes in conversation, whilst every second that ticked by further jeopardised McCoy. At last he turned to Spock with a gesture of resignation.

"It's no good, I can't get through to Podurov in person, he's in conference about the very papers I want to talk to him about! I've left a message, I can't do more."

"There are two further things we can do," Spock said quietly, "but risk is involved."

"Hang the risk! Quick, tell me!"

"We can contact Don Alto for back-up forces - he will move more speedily than the security forces - and we can ourselves take Bertha's Bar by storm."

Kirk grinned delightedly. "Mr. Spock, you'll make a hoodlum yet! Let's go!"

* * * *

PART 8

Bertha's Bar was a grimy, single-storeyed building in a dingy back street. The pavements were bedecked with litter, and the daytime scene was one of slumber, and lack of life and interest. McCoy suspected that the nighttime visitor would be met by quite a different picture. The bar itself had a battered sign and the paint peeling, dusty uncleaned windows, and lace curtains which had once been white but were now between grey and black.

McCoy waved the phaser that had gone with the guard's uniform. "Where?" he demanded hoarsely.

"In here," Jat whispered. "The bar will be empty now, but the brothers-in-arms will be in the back room."

When McCoy kicked open the door that Jat indicated and leaped through the doorway dragging the Tellarite after him, phaser at his head, half a dozen brothers-in-arms jumped up, startled. They looked a motley crew, McCoy reflected; unwashed and poorly dressed. Somehow they looked the archetype of revolutionaries of all ages and all places.

"What's going on?" one demanded to know. "Who's he?"

"Your erstwhile fall guy," McCoy replied gruffly. "I just came to tell you you'll have to find a new one. I've got your little game nicely figured out, thanks to Mr. Jat here."

"He knows I doped him and made him murder Hod!" Jat babbled, terrified.

The one who was clearly the leader looked with shrewd eyes from McCoy to Jat, and back to McCoy. "So you are the famous Dr. McCoy."

"And who, sir, are you?"

"The leader of this little group - Bantey is my code name. You are bold, my friend, I grant you that. But do you really think you can overpower seven of us singlehanded?"

"I'm not alone," McCoy lied. "I've called the security forces. They'll be here in a matter of minutes." It was only now, faced with the reality of the situation, that the doctor began to wonder just what he was going to do, realising how completely without a plan he was.

"And in the meantime?" Bantey was saying.

"One move and your brother-in-arms here gets it."

"We are all expendable for the cause," another of the group said. "Jat knows that, don't you Jat?"

"Yes, yes," Jat muttered, although he did not look too sure. The six had all risen to their feet; now they were all advancing in a semi-circle towards McCoy.

"I'm warning you!" McCoy rasped desperately.

"Of course, Doctor," Bantey drawled.

Then, as McCoy decided on what seemed the best course, swung his phaser from Jat to Bantey and went to fire, Jat jumped clear and another of the group, diving beneath the line of fire, floored McCoy. McCoy fired but too late, then someone knocked him cold.

Some time afterwards, the unknowing Kirk and Spock stood poised, one on either side of the door into the back room at Bertha's Bar. Kirk felt horribly naked without a phaser, but there had not been time to obtain one from the ship; besides, he felt it as well to keep his activities secret, at least for now. So he hoped that there would be only three or four men in the room, that he and Spock could deal with with their hands.

He glanced at his First Officer, who indicated readiness with a nod. "It would be best to proceed immediately, Captain."

"Yes, let's hope we can handle it until Don Alto or the security forces arrive."

With an expression of determination, Kirk kicked open the door, and the two officers leaped into the room together.

The sight that met their eyes brought them up short. McCoy was sitting in the centre of the room, bound to a chair. Jat and another man were working at a cabinet of what was clearly medical equipment.

"Today seems to be full of surprises," Bantey remarked, covering Kirk with McCoy's phaser. "Sit down, Mr. Whoever-you-are," he continued to Spock, "or your friend is a dead man."

"It's Kirk and Spock!" Jat gasped.

"What've you done to McCoy?" Kirk demanded, but Bantey was too busy laughing to reply immediately.

"So!" he crowed at last. "The great Captain James T. Kirk and Mr. Spock! Sit down, Mr. Half-Human-half-Vulcan, and let your Captain tie you up."

They did as instructed, reluctantly, Kirk always in the direct line of fire of the phaser. One of the others checked Kirk's knots, then seated the Captain

in another chair and bound him.

"This is better than I had hoped," Bantey said, pleased. "I was going to send Dr. McCoy to kill you both. Now there is no need. He can do the job here. Oh, yes," he added, "I knew you were on my trail. I have my connections too, you know."

Throughout all this Kirk's mind had been only half concentrating on Bantey's words. He was watching Jat and his companion working with chemicals, mixing something, and McCoy, unconscious on a chair.

"So it was a drug," he said.

Bantey nodded. "A handy little Romulan device, just the result of one of the many useful researches Federation money will be spent on once our Romulan friends take over, instead of paying the salaries of diplomats and politicians and other useless individuals - bah! But you will see just how useful... are you ready?" This to Jat.

In reply, the Tellarite picked up a syringe and filled it, then injected the contents into McCoy's neck.

"Bring him round," Bantey ordered.

Jat gave him a different injection, and McCoy slowly began to revive. At last, he sat up straight and opened his eyes.

"Dr. McCoy?" Kirk asked gently, hopefully. "Bones?"

"Jim?! What's going on?"

"You see, quite normal," Bantey said. He reached out and took a small phial of bluish powder that Jat held out. "The drug has no effect until..." He shook the phial. "One inhalation of this, and the victim becomes as a zombie, totally open to suggestions. But if he doesn't come into contact with the powder, the drug leaves the body in a matter of an hour or so, quite harmlessly."

"I see," Spock said slowly, as McCoy struggled in vain to escape, staring about him wide-eyed and frantic. "Somehow the first dose was administered to McCoy - can it be taken orally?"

"The painkillers!" Kirk pointed out. "He took painkillers..."

"... which he took from his case in sickbay. Jat somehow distracted his attention momentarily and exchanged the painkillers for the drug in tablet form," Spock continued. "Later, he left his quarters for some reason..."

"... and Jat met him in the corridor with the powder and the 'suggestions'," Kirk concluded triumphantly.

"How clever you are!" Bantey mocked.

"The security scan of the corridors will prove it," Spock said. "If this surmise is correct, we have irrefutable proof of McCoy's innocence."

"What a pity you will not live to tell your story," Bantey grinned. "And once back on the ship, McCoy will destroy the films. That is the beauty of the inhaled dose. It removes all memory of events that occurred after the first drug was taken. With both of you out of the way and the scans destroyed, our path will be clear again."

"There's no way you can force me...!" McCoy shouted.

"Oh no?" Without warning, Bantey tossed the powder into the doctor's face. McCoy coughed, spluttered, fought for breath; then the change took place. The blue eyes that the surgeon now turned on his Captain were glazed, unseeing. Kirk shuddered, a movement which Bantey was not slow to detect.

"Yes, Kirk, it is frightening, is it not? And he is completely in my power." So saying, he signalled to a Tellarite to untie McCoy, and reaching

on to the table, took up a slender dagger, its point honed to needle sharpness, and handed it to the doctor. McCoy took it without looking at it.

"Now," Bantey mused deliberately, "whom shall I kill first?"

"Why?" demanded Kirk, playing for time.

"You know why. Hod would have betrayed us; and you... you know too much. It began at the university. Even if you had never come here, you signed your own death warrant on the day you went there."

His eyes travelled thoughtfully back and forth between Kirk and Spock. "I think the Vulcan first. Let his friend Kirk suffer. McCoy, kill the Vulcan!"

"No!" Kirk shouted. But McCoy walked obliviously across the room, knife poised ready. When he was only inches from Spock he halted, rested the knife against the place where his friend's heart lay. The weapon was so sharp that just the slight pressure of the point drew blood.

"Kill him!" Bantey ordered. McCoy leaned slightly on the knife.

"No, wait, Bones!" Kirk shouted desperately. McCoy's subconscious seemed to respond to his nickname, and he hesitated, turned towards Kirk. Green blood was staining Spock's shirt. The Captain could see only one chance, and that a slender one.

"You've made a mistake, Bones," he said frantically. "He's half Human too, remember? Half Human."

"So what?" Bantey drawled.

"Half Human," Kirk repeated tersely.

The ploy worked. McCoy moved the knife to the place where a Human's heart would be, and without hesitation plunged it home.

Mr. Spock made a kind of soft, sobbing sound, and fell forward against his bonds. Dr. McCoy stood by, indifferent, awaiting his next order. Kirk could feel beads of sweat cold against his forehead.

"You've killed him, Bones," he whispered, praying McCoy would not check Spock's pulse.

"Good," said Bantey cheerfully. "Now do away with Kirk, and we are free."

"On da contrary, punk," said a new voice from the door, "I tink you're gonna be locked up for a long, long time. Git against da wall, all of ya!"

Don Alto Petrinelli stepped into the room through the still open door, Stengun at the ready, and followed by a dozen of his boys.

"Like dey say, assume da position!"

"Aw, Boss," said Lucky, as Bantey and his group were frisked, "cain't ah git da concrete overcoats ready?"

"No, ya cain't!" Don Alto repeated. "Now git dat madman's knife, why dontcha?"

"Sure ting, Boss."

Don Alto, untying Kirk, was looking critically at Spock. "Is he dead?"

" hope not." Kirk, once free, ran to Spock. "Mr. Spock?"

Spock raised his head drowsily.

Kirk began to untie him gently and carefully, whilst Don Alto supported him, conscious that every movement jarred him and worsened the pain.

"Gee, Boss!" Lucky exclaimed admiringly, "stabbed t'rough da heart an' he lives!"

"Don' jest stan' dere gawpin', go git da ambulance, why dontcha?" Don Alto

sighed resignedly.

"Sure ting, Boss."

* * * *

PART 9

Leonard McCoy stood in the Enterprise corridor, facing a door and rubbing his hands. He stepped forward and went to sound the door buzzer, then let his hand fall before its mission was accomplished, and began to pace silently back and forth, trying to gather courage.

He and Kirk had together paid the nominal fine that had been imposed on Spock for his 'borrowing' of the shuttlecraft; the amount had been very slight, as the craft had been safely returned, and considering the exceptional circumstances under which it had been taken. Kirk had asked Podurov not to mention the matter to Spock while he was unwell, since he and McCoy had, unknown to Spock, footed the bill. But McCoy had not yet spoken to Spock about what had occurred on Starbase M71.

"Och, Doctor, were ye just going to see Mr. Spock?"

"Oh, Scotty. Well, as a matter of fact..."

"Could ye give him these technical journals for me? I thought he might like to look them over while he's convalescing. I canna' tarry, I'm due on duty." And so saying, the Scotsman hurried away, leaving McCoy laden down with an impressive pile of journals. The doctor sighed. Now he had no choice but to go through with it.

"Come," Spock's voice answered McCoy's buzzing. To the untrained ear it sounded as always, but to McCoy his voice was still weak.

He was sitting up in a chair, against doctor's orders.

He glanced at McCoy. "Good afternoon, Doctor," he greeted politely.

"Scotty sent you these," McCoy said awkwardly. "Shall I put them on the table?"

"Thank you."

"He - uh - thought you might like to look them over."

"That was a thoughtful gesture. Please convey my appreciation."

McCoy thought that Spock was not making this easy for him. Then it occurred to him, in the rapid succession of thoughts that sometimes comes in moments of stress, that perhaps Spock did not even understand, could not understand. How alien is alien?

"Mind if I sit down?"

Spock politely indicated a seat.

"How are you feeling, Spock?"

"Somewhat improved, Doctor."

"Is there still pain?"

Spock looked away, affirming it. "You inquired about that this morning."

"I know."

The silence was painful. At last Spock turned towards McCoy. Bones sensed the intense Vulcan gaze, but could not meet the deep brown eyes.

"You are wondering if I can understand," Spock said gently, "that, although what occurred was not your fault, you wish to apologise. You feel guilty. Am I correct?"

"You're a Vulcan," McCoy whispered.

"I am also half Human."

"I'm sorry... "

"For an accident of nature?"

"No, because for once I forgot about it!" McCoy found himself laughing. "Damn it, Spock, there are times I think you should be the doctor! You sure know some good tonics."

"The situation in which you find yourself is not entirely unfamiliar to me. There was once a time when I also tried to kill someone when I was not myself... a good friend... "

A scene on Vulcan flashed through McCoy's mind; Spock, pon farr, and Jim bleeding and as if dead. He nodded. "I'd forgotten that, too."

"It is not an easy matter to come to terms with the residual... feelings," Spock hesitated fractionally over that word, "and it is impossible to forget. I know. But it can be... lived with. I believe Jim has never held that occasion against me. I can do no better than to follow his example. Besides," he added, "you were acquitted at the courtmartial. Who am I to contest so weighty a decision?"

"Do I detect a note of sarcasm, Mr. Spock?"

"I?" Spock queried innocently. "Of course," he added as if an after-thought, "the presiding judge was Human, and therefore not infallible."

McCoy could not let this pass. "Why, of all the... !" Fortunately, the intercom interrupted him.

"Mr. Spock, is Dr. McCoy with you?"

"McCoy here. What's the trouble, Jim?"

"You'd better come, Bones. Chekov just tripped and measured his length, and he says he can't walk, he's hurt his ankle."

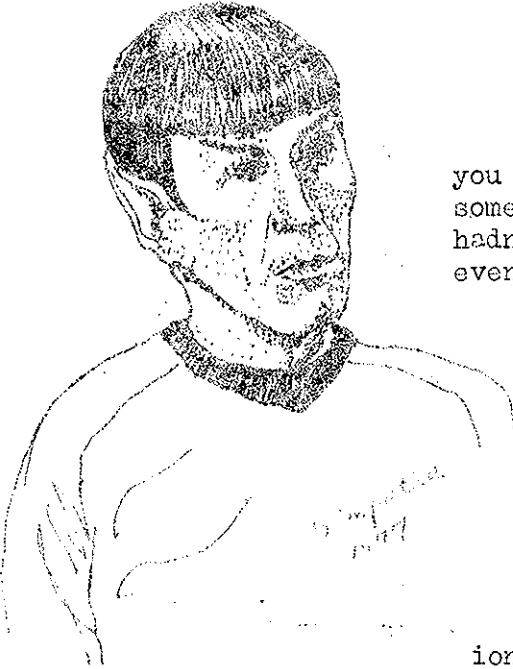
"On my way. McCoy out." The doctor grinned. "I saw him talking to a pretty young yeoman yesterday, no doubt she's hanging about for him and he fancies getting off duty early!" he added to Spock, who simply raised an eyebrow, somehow making that an appreciative gesture. "Take it easy, Spock, won't you? I'll be in to see you again shortly."

So McCoy left Spock, and went about his mundane tasks, grateful for the return to normality. Humming quietly to himself, while he was also deeply thankful for two very good friends, he was musing about a fresh scar that would never completely heal, and some strange half-Vulcan balm.

AS NEVER BEFORE by Gillian Catchpole

(Based on Metamorphosis)

When two lives blended, transformed to one,
I saw you not in alien form
But as you always hoped I could,
A woman, soft and lovely.
Days will dawn and days will end
For a time after both our passings.
Gone forever the stretch of eternity.
A lifetime is all we'll ever have,
For two as us that is enough.
For now I see you as I never saw before,
So very beautiful.

THE LAST TROUBADOUR by Margaret Draper

It was all Sulu's fault, really. On the other hand, you might say (though not in his hearing) that Spock to some extent brought it on himself. But then again, if it hadn't been for Admiral Harper in the first place - or even Mrs. Harper...

I see I'm going to have to start from the beginning. Better find yourself a chair, and suspend that disbelief for a while.

Sitting comfortably? Right...

Canis pseudocornis was its technical name; Harper's Plofflehound was perhaps the most complimentary of the soubriquets by which it was better known to the crew of the Enterprise.

Canes Pseudo... Plofflehouounds are loyal, affectionate, gentle, intelligent, clean, moderate in their feeding and breeding habits. They are herbivores from Alfa 3, small, somewhat dog-like in appearance - if you ignore that curious horny protruberance on the head for which no obvious purpose has been found.

They are slightly delicate.

They are rather rare.

A trifle temperamental, perhaps, but who would want to upset them?

They make excellent pets.

At least, that's what Mrs. Harper thought.

So did the Admiral, of course.

"It's a present for my wife, Captain. She breeds them, you know," said Admiral Harper, beaming all over his broad, beefy face. "I'm sure you'll take great care of the little fellow. His name's - er - Ploffles."

Ploffles had long, silky golden curls.

Ploffles had dark, melting eyes, and he sat at the Admiral's feet, his head cocked on one side.

Captain Kirk repressed sharp pangs of nausea, and put on his best 'humour the Admiral' expression. "Charming. It'll be a pleasure to have him aboard. Mr. Spock here will see he's properly looked after, won't you, Spock?" He smiled diplomatically.

Spock nodded impassively.

* * *

McCoy swore comprehensively.

Sulu, in the next room inspecting the new nurse inspecting his cut finger, was greatly impressed.

"Er - what's up, Doc?" he enquired. Muffled objurgations about Vulcans and veterinary surgeons were his only answer. Curious, he slipped down from his perch on the corner of a medical couch and strolled to the doorway, followed by a rapidly unrolling bandage and Nurse Popper uttering shrill little cries of protest.

McCoy, red-faced and speechless with fury, was bending over what seemed to be a golden-haired Yorkshire terrier, tethered securely to the leg of his desk. Fastened round the animal's neck was a printed label reading 'Life Sciences'. Underneath that, someone had written, 'For the personal attention of Dr. McCoy'.

Vulcan script is quite unmistakable.

"That... That... If he thinks he... "

"Isn't it sweet?" Nurse Popper clasped her hands together with delight and make cooing sounds. "Aren't you the booful...?"

McCoy turned a deeper shade of puce. Sulu grinned mischievously. "He's real cute," he agreed, watching the Doctor struggling for control.

"Mr. Sulu," he replied in a dangerously quiet voice. "Take that - creature, take Flopsy Bunny here, take them both and clear out of my office! And if you can manage to dispose of either of them, or preferably both, through some convenient airlock, I shall be forever in your debt."

"But, Doctor..."

"GET OUT!!!!"

Mar, girl and plofflehound fled before the storm.

"And stay out!" roared the Doctor, hurling the bandage after them. Muttering savagely to himself, he swabbed at the little pool that had formed under the corner of the table.

* * *

So it was that Sulu, with the plofflehound in tow, became a familiar sight trotting up and down the corridors of the Enterprise between watches. The humorous remarks had almost died away, and Sulu was more or less resigned to the situation, when the catastrophe occurred.

He'd had a tough day dodging Klingons and beating off the amorous advances of purple princesses - anyway, he'd had a tiring day, and his quarters seemed more than usually humdrum, not to mention rather full of hot plofflehound, so it seemed an ideal occasion for an evening out.

He whistled up the mutt, who responded with his usual enthusiastic "Chigger chigger," and clipped on the lead, and wandered off towards rec room 4, where he'd heard there was to be an entertainment that evening.

The room was already crowded when he got there, but Chekov in the front row gave him a good-natured wave and squeezed up closed to Nurse Popper - Nurse Popper? - to let him and Ploffles in.

He nodded his thanks and seated himself with the hound on his lap, stretching his legs in the first moment of relaxation he'd had all day.

The 'entertainment' began with the usual amateurish comedy turns, a song or two, monologues, dancing, and a display of more or less successful card tricks... Sulu dozed, and Ploffles dozed too, lifting his head from time to time to snort at a more than usually inept item. Only the songs revived his flagging attention - Sulu had noticed before that he seemed to appreciate music, opera in particular, and would 'chigger' softly to himself when the background stereo was playing.

Towards the end of the first half of the concert Sulu suddenly yawned and sat up again. The highlight of the evening, for him, was to be the next item; a solo by Uhura, accompanied by Spock on the Vulcan lyre.

Ploffles, disturbed by Sulu's movement, sat up too.

Uhura, swathed in gold, came on with Spock in tow. The Vulcan settled himself on a stool, Uhura advanced a step or two, and the lights dimmed gently behind them both, softening to a deep, misty blue. The material of her dress seemed to glitter with a light of its own as she stood motionless before them all, her eyes remote.

A stillness fell on the crowd, and in the twilit hush Sulu became aware for the first time of the tinkle of drops from the tiny fountain playing in the corner of the rec. room.

The fountain quickened; no, those clear, bell-like notes must be coming from the lyre, out of the shadows where Spock sat... now Uhura was humming, a rich sound that blended with the resonant tones of the alien instrument... and the words came at last. The Rain-song; a melody from her homeland, compulsive, throbbing, swelling till it filled the room, then falling away to silence. The audience sighed softly; then came the applause, and the stamping for an encore. Even Ploffles was chiggering with enthusiasm, though he was somewhat annoyed by Sulu's attempts to clap above his head.

Uhura smiled her thanks to the audience's appreciation. The lights swirled, brightened, turned green, and she nodded minutely to Spock as she caught his eye. The lyre broke into a quick, lively tune and she started to sing again, with Spock softly humming in harmony.

"Chigger chigger chigger," said Ploffles reflectively.

At the chorus everyone joined in - it was an old favourite with the crew.

"Chigger chigger chigger," uttered Ploffles firmly, ears pricked as he stared at the performers.

The second verse was Spock's...

"CHIGGER CHIGGER CHIGGER!!!"

The plofflehound hurled himself like a golden torpedo bolt from Sulu's lap, whipping the leash through his helpless fingers, and landed squarely in Spock's manly bosom. Totally unprepared, the Vulcan disappeared backwards off his stool in a jangle of lyre strings and a shower of pretty coloured sparks, and crashed to the deck.

Sulu sat paralysed, mouth open with shock.

Nurse Popper turned white.

Chekov, I regret to say, giggled.

Ploffles sat proudly on the First Officer's chest, licking his face and crooning happily, "Chigger chigger chigger."

Spock's expression was magnificently calm, his eyes closed. In a slightly muffled voice he said, very evenly, "Lieutenant, would you kindly remove this alien life-form from my upper torso?"

Uhura leaped forward as if stung, and hurried to his rescue. He rose with stately dignity. "Thank you." His eyes met those of the helmsman. "Mr. Sulu, I would suggest that you take this creature out of the recreation room for the remainder of the performance."

Sulu essayed a sickly smile. "Aye, sir." He was only too eager to follow Spock's advice. The other side of the door seemed an excellent place to be; the other side of the ship, better still. In fact, he had a feeling that the other side of the galaxy would be a nice spot for a holiday, say for the next ten years or so. Vulcans never forgot...

He bundled up the squirming hound and retreated hastily, gasping with relief as he reached the sanctuary of the corridor. The strains of the interrupted song had resumed, and he looked ruefully at the little animal in his arms. Just when he'd been enjoying himself, too! Slowly he turned away.

"Chigger chigger chigger," said Ploffles softly. Sulu took no notice.

"Chigger chigger chigger!" more loudly.

"Oh, shut up."

"Chigger chigger chigger!" There was definitely a threatening note in the plofflehound's voice now as they drew away from the vicinity of the rec. room, and he began to wriggle violently.

"All right," replied Sulu crossly, and halted. The song finished; the

plofflehound sighed, and cocked his head enquiringly.

"Chigger chigger chigger?"

The applause within died away, and a mumble of voices began.

"Chigger chigger chigger!" said Ploffles angrily. There was no response.

"CHIGGER CHIGGER CHIGGER!!!"

Obdurate silence from within, save for the murmur of the audience.

"CHIGGER CHIGGER CHIGGER.....eeeeEEEE!!!"

Sulu dropped the plofflehound as if he'd been burned. The high-pitched shriek continued, echoing through the ship, varying its note but steadily increasing in volume. Louder and louder and louder.....

Chaos broke out. Six crewmen fainted - one of them three decks away. Equipment throughout the ship shuddered as Ploffles hit sympathetic resonances. McCoy, half dressed, burst from his room, a shattered tooth glass in his hand, while down in Engineering, Mr. Scott was on his knees, grieving over the wreckage of his whisky bottles. Delicate navigational instruments went wild...

Captain Kirk, up on the bridge, was frankly bewildered, but he issued immediate orders to seal off the afflicted area of the ship. In vain - the sound cut through emergency bulkheads like a phaser on full power.

At the heart of the maelstrom Spock, hands pressed over his super-sensitive ears, face contorted in agony, reeled out into the corridor to find Sulu desperately trying to muffle the hound in his uniform shirt. It was not the slightest use.

"What happened, Mr. Sulu?" bellowed Spock. His deeper tones penetrated the uproar, and the Oriental looked round.

"It was when you stopped singing, sir!" he shrieked back. "I think he was disappointed!"

"He was WHAT?"

"DISAPPOINTED!!!"

Ploffles choosing that moment to take a deep breath, Sulu's clarion voice rang out unopposed. Spock lowered his hands cautiously.

"Surely, Mr. Sulu, you're not suggesting... "

"Chigger chigger chigger," the plofflehound said meaningly, his pansy-like eyes fixed on the Vulcan. "CHIGGER... "

"Perhaps if you were to carry on... " Sulu cut in hastily.

"Mr. Sulu," Spock began frostily.

"eeeeeeEEEEEEEE!!!"

"For pity's sake, please try, Mr. Spock!" screeched Sulu.

"La la la," uttered Spock experimentally.

"EEEEeee... " The squealing stopped as if by magic, and Ploffles gazed adoringly up at him. "Chigger chigger... "

"Don't stop, please, sir," begged Sulu.

"La la la," repeated Spock self-consciously, "dum de dah. It must... la la la... be something to do... la la la... with certain frequencies which appeal particularly strongly... "

"Unless it's you personally, sir?" suggested Sulu.

"Let us hope... la la la... that it is not," replied the First Officer grimly.

So began the second worst period in the history of the Enterprise. It was ushered in by several remarkable discoveries.

Firstly, Dr. McCoy found out that no known tranquilliser could keep canis pseudocornis under for more than five minutes at a time. Early specimens had been collected of their own free will, apparently. "Never give a sucker an even break," the Doctor had muttered obscurely, on learning this. Stronger doses of his knock-out potions would be fatal; a consummation devoutly to be wished, he felt privately, but Ploffles was valuable - to Admiral Harper, at least.

Secondly, attempts to isolate Ploffles in a soundproof room were not entirely successful; emergency welding teams had to be called out to deal with the resulting metal fatigue, and it took thirteen verses of Brahms' Lullaby to soothe the hysterical creature down again. Someone suggested, only half jokingly, that Spock and the hound finish the journey by shuttlecraft - or even in a liferaft, on tow. Captain Kirk vetoed the idea on the grounds of the danger involved - to himself, chiefly, if he had to break the news to Spock. The Vulcan's temper was a little - frayed at present.

Thirdly, despite exhaustive trials, no mechanical methods of reproducing sounds could satisfy canis pseudocornis' aesthetic sensibilities. Sulu's misgivings were well founded; Ploffles didn't just like 'certain frequencies', he liked singing, preferably with a real live singer attached. He could be fooled only momentarily by the trills and warbles of the computer, and even tape-loops couldn't keep him happy for long. No, it had to be the real McCoy - or rather, the real Spock.

Life on the bridge became sheer hell. Only Uhura preserved a smiling countenance. Captain Kirk attributed this at first to her strong musical bent; it was only when he caught sight of her from the back that he suddenly realised she had transceivers in both ears. A heavy cloud of gloom enveloped the rest of the crew as the laryngitic Vulcan ploughed his way miserably through song after song - Ploffles liked variety, too.

Fifteen days out, Kirk could finally stand no more. As the last pathetic strains of 'Free from his fetters grim' died away, he steelled himself to speak to the Vulcan. With the Gilbert and Sullivan finished, he knew that ahead stretched the arid wastes of Gluck, Cound, Grieg and a host of deservedly little-known classics. If he had to listen to Spock declaring that he'd lost his Eurydice he'd... he'd...

"Mr. Spock!" he said decisively.

"Captain?" It was the merest croak.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Spock: I'm declaring you unfit for duty."

"But Captain - my work..." the Vulcan pleaded huskily.

"I know, I know, it's as efficient as ever - but I think it's in the best interests of the ship as a whole if we dispense with your services up here."

"Chigger chigger chigger," murmured Ploffles from his seat under the computer panel. Spock shot him a look of what might, in a Human, be called pure hatred. It might in a Vulcan too, come to that.

"I suggest that you withdraw to your quarters for the present," Kirk continued.

"Yes, sir." Spock paused, then added thoughtfully, "But is that entirely fair to my neighbours in the adjoining cabins?"

"Never mind..." Kirk's voice trailed off as he suddenly caught the implications of Spock's remark. Guess who had the adjoining stateroom? "Er - perhaps, after all..."

A quick burst of song interrupted him; Ploffles was getting restive.

"As I was saying, possibly it would be better to - er - distribute the load more fairly? If you were to walk up and down the corridors, say?"

For ten terrible days the Last of the Troubadours paced the decks of the Enterprise, shadowed by his faithful admirer, snatching quick naps while the hound slept (canis pseudocornis needs very little sleep), shunned by all and living mainly on liquids. For one ghastly afternoon he lost his voice completely; while McCoy frantically tried everything from throat-swabs to 'Mother Carey's Soothing Syrup' the entire medical staff attempted to divert Ploffles' attention with massed renderings of Great Operatic Choruses. They failed miserably, of course, and the resulting migraines and blackouts among the rest of the crew filled the wards to overflowing. Kirk's ship-wide appeal for 'anyone who can sing like Mr. Spock' bore little fruit; no-one would admit to such a thing, for numerous excellent reasons - except for Kevin Riley, and he was disqualified by unanimous consent. The Captain was desperately contemplating compulsory auditions on the hangar deck - or automatic destruct, even - when the glad news came through that Spock's voice was back. And through the ship the wailing died away...

All bad things come to an end, fortunately, and never was planetfall more gladly made than at Bellatrix 8, home of Admiral Harper's lady. The Captain, his exhausted First Officer and the excited Ploffles beamed down into what might have been mistaken for a private menagerie. Outside the palatial house were animals of every imaginable, and unimaginable, shape and size.

Mrs. Harper, a generously constructed lady, bore down on the trio with alacrity, clasping what appeared to be a golden chest-wig or large powder puff to her bosom. A muffled 'chigger chigger' sound soon enlightened the Enterprise crewmen, however, and Ploffles was overjoyed at meeting Mitsu, his new companion. Mrs. Harper tearfully thanked the Captain for the care he had taken of the dear little doggy. Kirk assured her it had been no trouble at all. Spock refrained from comment. Out of the corner of his eye he could see the two animals circling each other, chiggering softly, both pausing from time to time to gaze up at him.

"Captain... " he whispered urgently.

"Not now, Spock." The Captain was listening politely to Mrs. Harper's effusions.

"Captain," Spock insisted, and Kirk finally looked round. The ploffe-hounds appeared to be conferring about something, eyeing the First Officer carefully. Kirk stared at the Vulcan with a wild surmise, as the same appalling thought occurred to them simultaneously.

"Er - excuse us, Mrs. Harper. So nice to have... must get back - the ship, you know... " gabbled Captain Kirk, trained diplomat. Spock's communicator was already out and the Vulcan could be heard hoarsely imploring Mr. Scott to look in on his signal.

Mrs. Harper looked at them in astonishment. "Must you... ?"

"We must."

Four dark, velvety eyes were fastened on Spock, two golden muzzles rose as one. "CHIGGER CHIGGER..."

"ENERGISE!" cried two despairing voices.

"eeeeEEEEEE..... "

And as they stumbled from the transporter platform, the scream was still ringing in their ears!

AN INVESTMENT IN TIME by Nancy J. Kippax

Spock convulsed spasmodically, the restraints cutting painfully as his body arched. Kirk, alert despite the long vigil, reached across and quickly released the confining straps.

"Easy... it's all right... you're safe, now..." He reached up tenderly to push the damp hair from the Vulcan's face.

Spock turned grateful eyes to his Captain and focussed with difficulty, acknowledging the familiar presence with a thin smile before lapsing into the semi-stupor of the drug-induced rest his system craved.

Kirk ached with his friend's pain. Spock's chest and arms had been ripped open by the giant wang-cat on Regulus Seven. He had been rescued, half dead from infection and loss of blood, only his Vulcan abilities having saved him this far. McCoy's skills had done the rest, and the doctor was optimistic about Spock's recovery now, but my god, how it must hurt, Kirk thought in despair.

As Kirk settled on the side of the bed, he saw another flicker of pain cross the Vulcan's face, quickly replaced by determination. Spock was controlling the pain, but it was taking its toll on his strength.

"Spock... is there anything I can do?" he asked, his voice soft, yet sounding loud in the silence of the sickbay cubicle.

Without opening his eyes, Spock extended one hand, palm upward, toward Kirk. His arm, sterile dressing from the wrist up, barely moved. Understanding, and touched, Kirk gently grasped the hand with his own, transmitting his presence and concern. Instinctively, Spock drew nearer.

How far they had come together, Kirk reflected. As Spock's features relaxed again in sleep, Kirk couldn't help remembering another time, so long ago, when the situation had been almost identical, yet the two men involved had been so different. It had been only two months after Kirk had assumed command of the Enterprise. Relaxing, he let his memories take over, let himself drift back to that far away time...

* * *

Anxiety consumed the new Captain. The entire bridge crew could see it. Three crew members, including the First Officer, had been separated from the rest of the landing party, and could not be located in the specified area of exploration.

Kappa Theta was an uncharted world, and a new planet could always contain unknown hazards. Kirk had sent down a routine preliminary science team to investigate. Four returned at the specified time; Spock and the other two - Lt. Selena Washington and Ensign Timothy O'Dell - had neither answered a call nor showed on a sensor scan.

As the hours spun away, the ship searched an ever widening arc. Finally, the unconscious body of Lt. Washington was found and brought aboard. Then, minutes later, before the young lieutenant could be questioned, they found the mutilated, lifeless Ensign O'Dell. Kirk was in sickbay with Dr. Boyce when the corpse was delivered.

Something - some unknown life form - had eaten away sections of flesh. Other areas were blackened with hideous burns. Ensign O'Dell had been twenty-three. Kirk felt ill.

He was the Captain. He could not afford to show how the death affected him. No matter that O'Dell was the first casualty in his crew. No matter that his First Officer was still unaccounted for. Boyce regarded him curiously as he straightened and cleared his throat.

"What did this?" Kirk asked tightly.

"We'll know after the autopsy is performed, Captain," Boyce replied, not bothering to mask his own sorrow. "My primary concern is Selena. She may hold the answer to all this."

"Yes," Kirk agreed mechanically. "All right. Carry on, Doctor." The correct military language, the precise detachment of a commanding officer; Kirk was so tired of it all.

He wandered into Boyce's empty office and stood, staring at nothing, unable to relate to his surroundings.

The past two months had been a whirlwind of adjustment - to the ship, the crew, the daily routine and the responsibility of command. Two months. Had it really been that long? So much had been crammed into the short span of time that he marvelled at having accomplished it all. There had been the seemingly endless departmental briefings, all the new names and faces to match up, the myriad details of shipboard routine to learn and consider. His senior officers had been helpful, polite, yet there was no-one to whom he could relate, no-one with whom he could relax and let down occasionally.

Now, taken by this new tragedy, Kirk saw that he had not tried. Perhaps there had not been time, but Kirk could see how his strong sense of duty had led to this awful loneliness. He had not been able to let down with anyone, not even his second-in-command.

Spock had been there, at his side, since the first day he came aboard. His cool efficiency had intimidated Kirk at first, then he had come to accept it and be grateful for it. He could be the detached, impersonal Captain with Spock, because that was what the Vulcan expected. Or, did he?

Of all the crew, only Spock had made an effort toward friendliness. No, that wasn't the correct term, either. Spock had met him as an equal, as one who gave respect, but expected it in return. When the Vulcan discovered that Kirk played chess, they had begun a tournament which filled many of their empty, off-duty hours.

Yet, even now, Kirk felt as though he did not even know the alien First Officer. He might be dead - Spock's body might be beamed up exactly like O'Dell's - and Kirk had never made any effort to close the gap between them.

Suddenly, Dr. Boyce was beside him; Kirk hadn't even heard him enter the room.

"Captain?" Kirk turned. "They've located Mr. Spock. All we know is that he is alive."

A wave of relief washed through him and he permitted the emotion to show. Boyce smiled; Kirk could read the approval in the old doctor's face.

"Let's go," Kirk said shortly.

As they entered the examination room, a security team was transferring Spock's limp form to a table. Kirk reached his side first, and the sight made him draw a deep breath.

Spock's entire right side, from neck to ankle, was blackened with the same corrosive burns which had covered O'Dell. His uniform had been torn to shreds, and there was a gaping, green mass of raw flesh on his hip where something had ripped his skin away. The First Officer was, mercifully, unconscious.

Boyce muttered a curse, and began cutting away the charred, blood-soaked clothing. Kirk watched, then he impulsively reached across the table to help. Cradling Spock's head, he drew the Vulcan towards him, onto his uninjured left side. Boyce nodded briskly.

"Good. Hold him steady."

Kirk found the comment rather incongruous, since the Vulcan was unconscious; still, he complied, holding quietly to the injured man. Spock's

breathing was warm and faint against his arm, and Kirk found it curiously soothing.

As the doctor sprayed a cooling antiseptic on the burned arm, Spock suddenly bolted to consciousness with a startled violence. Kirk reflexively tightened his hold.

"Easy, Mr. Spock - you're back on the Enterprise," Boyce said. Kirk was unable to speak; embarrassment at the intimacy unnerved him.

Spock tilted pain-filled eyes to see who was holding him. Kirk saw surprise flicker, then a dull mask cloud the expression.

"Captain... I am... all right now," he said formally. "There is no need for restraint."

Awkwardly, Kirk stepped back. "Good. Save your strength, Mr. Spock. Don't try to talk." He watched as Dr. Boyce completed his treatment and instructed two orderlies to transfer the First Officer to a private cubicle.

Kirk followed the doctor to his office persistently. "Your evaluation, Dr. Boyce? What is Spock's prognosis?"

It wasn't that he did not have faith in Boyce - the doctor was the top in his field - but the man was getting old; he had confided to Kirk that he would be retiring at the end of his tour next month. He frequently left the actual medical work to his junior officers, presiding over the administrative end of the department; in fact, Kirk had been surprised to see him treating Spock today.

"You saw the extent of his injuries, Captain!" Boyce snapped. "It's doubtful whether a Human would have survived this long. But Spock's Vulcan physiology is stronger than ours, and he has a higher tolerance to pain. Who knows? I've seen your First Officer through worse crises than this - but don't misunderstand, Captain - it is bad."

Kirk looked away, anguish seeping through his exhausted system. Still no answers, still no positive hope...

"Captain, I recommend you get some rest now. There's nothing further you can do down here," Boyce said more kindly. "You'll be notified if there's any change."

"No - I don't want rest, I want answers," Kirk insisted doggedly. "Has Lt. Washington regained consciousness?"

"When have I had time to check with her doctor?" Boyce retorted. "Whatever did this, there's no immediate danger to the ship or her crew."

The implication was plain; Kirk pretended to acquiesce. "All right, Doctor. I'll be in my quarters."

Perversely, he left Sickbay and went to the bridge. He informed the anxious crew what little information he had. Nothing was happening; eventually, Kirk did make his way to his quarters, but there was nothing to hold him there, and rest was an impossibility. He kept seeing O'Dell and Mr. Spock and Washington - people for whom he was responsible. Misery engulfed him.

It was all part of the job - and nothing he could not cope with, given time. But it was the first time - always the hardest, he'd heard. You mean it gets easier? I doubt it.

If the victim had been anyone other than Spock, perhaps he could have communicated his sorrow to the Vulcan. Spock had undoubtedly dealt with similar situations; his logical, non-emotional assurance would be welcomed right now.

Strange, how insidiously he had come to depend on his First Officer - almost without thinking about it.

Now, the Vulcan was... alone. Abruptly, Kirk left his cabin and returned to the Sickbay.

Dr. Boyce hailed him as he entered.

"Captain Kirk - I was just about to call you. Selena regained consciousness. We got her statement, then gave her a sedative to put her to sleep for a while. Quite a harrowing experience." Kirk waited; Boyce went on.

"She and O'Dell wandered off, following some irregular readings on the tricorder. Apparently, Spock went searching for them when he discovered their absence. Quite unexpectedly, they were attacked by some large... animals, beings, who knows? She described them as tripeds, winged but not capable of flight, dark, shaggy... huge, snoutlike mouths like a shark or a dolphin. They swept down on them - that's her term - and O'Dell managed to shove her through a small opening into a cave. He never made it through before they got to him. Their fur seemed to secrete some kind of acid - O'Dell couldn't touch them.

Selena wasn't armed, and O'Dell couldn't reach his phaser. Suddenly, Spock was there, joining the melee - he was armed, killed several of the things, but one got to him, burning and chewing at him. Selena saw him go down - that's when she passed out.

She must have regained consciousness, left the cave and headed toward the rest of the party, although she has no recollection of moving. And, we can also assume that Spock's weapon frightened the other beasts off and he was eventually able to defeat his attacker."

Kirk shook his head, trying to banish the gruesome picture Boyce had conjured. He swore, bitterly. Then, "How is Spock?"

"No change. Rest is good for him. He's been drifting in and out."

"I want to see him."

"I told you - he's asleep."

"He's also alone," Kirk returned reproachfully. Boyce offered no further objections, so Kirk entered the cubicle.

The Vulcan was lying flat on his left side, the steri-light above bathing his wounds. He was draped with a sheet, carefully exposing his injured side while affording coverage to the rest of him.

Pulling a chair close to the bed, Kirk sat quietly for several moments watching the slow rise and fall of Spock's breathing, the barely discernable twitching of the injured limbs. He wished there was some way he could let his First Officer know that he was not alone, that someone cared. Kirk knew it could mean so much.

He is Vulcan, others would argue. He has no need for warmth, for Human concern. Perhaps they were right - but what if they weren't? How could any living, sentient creature deny the basic emotional needs?

Suddenly, Kirk realised that was exactly what he had been doing to himself, letting his rank strip him of his basic warmth. He had been so concerned about doing a good job, presenting the best image, he had forgotten the simple, Human touch he had learned years ago.

Now he understood. No-one on the Enterprise had reached out to him because he had reached out to no one. Only Spock, in his own way, had tried to climb that wall - probably because he saw a mirror reflection of his own loneliness.

And just as Spock had pierced Kirk's somber mask, Kirk had seen beneath the surface of the Vulcan's immobility. He knew now that his instinct today was right. Spock, too, needed someone.

The Vulcan shifted, muttering something indistinguishable. His left hand slipped off the side of the bed. Gently, Kirk reached over and moved it back into place, letting his fingers rest for a heartbeat.

Spock's eyes opened for a moment, but Kirk wasn't sure if he recognised his Captain there.

"I'll be here," Kirk murmured softly, "if it means anything. I'll be with you as long as you need me."

Hours passed, a blur of fatigue and depression. Boyce came in twice to administer a hypospray, gave his Captain a curious look, shook his head to indicate no change, and said nothing. There was no change in the readings; they remained dangerously low. The steri-light was turned off and medicated wet-packs applied to the burns. Kirk watched Spock carefully after that, changing the dressings as soon as they began to dry out.

Once, as Kirk was beginning to doze, a nurse came in and offered to relieve him. He knew it was more of Boyce's patronising. Spock, from a medical standpoint, needed no one at his bedside, Captain or nurse. Kirk sent her away, kindly but firmly.

As the panel indicators began to rise slightly, Spock roused several times for a few moments. He seemed only dimly aware of his surroundings, but drank gratefully from the cup Kirk held for him. Again, his consciousness surfaced, this time as Kirk was changing the wet-packs along the side of his chest.

Kirk's movements did not falter, but he felt that same twinge of embarrassment, discomfort, which he had experienced in the examination room.

"Captain? Why are you... "

"Shh..." Kirk straightened, relieved to see the clarity in the thin brown eyes. "Lie still. How do you feel?" He did not want Spock to question why he was there. He didn't know if he could answer.

"The pain is... tolerable. I can manage it. You need not..."

"I know," Kirk interrupted the terse speech quickly, "but I want to. Call it an investment in time, for a very exceptional First Officer."

One eyebrow rose, whether in surprise, indignation or some other reaction, Kirk could not tell. But the Vulcan was very definitely back to his healthier self. Poor Spock; he'd go on denying himself those basic needs, denying the existence of emotions - well, Kirk reflected, perhaps it was right, for Spock. But not for James T. Kirk, not any more. And he would be there - if Spock ever made the same decision.

"I'll get Dr. Boyce," he said confidently, and left the cubicle.

* * *

Kirk's memory broke off as Spock roused again. He had moved around the room as he thought, now he returned to the bed.

"Feeling any better, Mr. Spock?" he asked affectionately, easily, bending over to lay his hand along the Vulcan's cheek. It was cool and moist; the fever had broken.

"I am... tired," Spock admitted, staring up at Kirk with open candor. "However, I do not desire any more of McCoy's sedatives."

"I don't blame you," Kirk responded sympathetically, settling on the side of the bed, "but rest is best for you right now."

"I was... dreaming... about the cat," Spock confessed, his eyes sliding away in horror at the memory.

"You reached out... took my hand..."

"I remember."

"I told you once... I'd be with you as long as you need me."

Spock regarded him in puzzlement.

"After you were attacked on Kappa Theta. You were delirious - you probably don't remember," Kirk explained lightly.

"I recall the incident," Spock admitted. "You stayed with me... I wondered why, at the time."

"And how did you explain it - later?"

Spock pressed his head back against the pillow. "You called it an investment in time. I concluded you were filling some need within yourself."

"Within myself," Kirk conceded, "and within you. I think my investment paid off, didn't it?"

Spock did not reply, but a faint smile illumined his face. Silently, he reached up his hand, not in delirium this time, and Kirk entwined his fist within the Vulcan's. The past was remembered, then forgotten, as the reality of the present flowed between them.

THE WHISKY CHORUS by Kathleen Glancy

Starfleet version - guess who's singing!

Now Spock he said tae me
 "Just why do you like drinking?"
 I answered him with glee
 "It clarifies ma thinking"

A glass of guid Scotch whisky, Spock
 Aye, just a little drappie
 If Vulcans drank it, what a shock
 They'd soon find they were happy
 When we're flying off through space
 The danger that's before us
 Guid whisky helps us face
 And that's the Starship Chorus.

"Now Saurian brandy's joys
 Can make the Captain frisky
 Mint julep is McCoy's
 But I prefer Scotch whisky."

Chorus

"You'll run out soon, you will,"
 Says Kirk, but I'm not fearing
He disna ken aboot the still
 I run in Engineering.

A glass of guid Scotch whisky, Spock
 Aye, just a little drappie
 If Vulcans drank it, what a shock
 They'd soon find they were happy
 When we're flying off through space
 The danger that's before us
 Guid whisky helps us face
 And that's the Starship Chorus!
